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Edited by
John B. Chethimattam

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Contemporary Vision of Religion

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CONTENTS

	Page
Editorial	339
One Faith; Many Religions	
Implications of Religious Pluralism	341
<i>John B. Chethimattam</i>	
Inter-Religious Relationships Today	356
<i>T. K. John</i>	
Diversity of Religions and Unity in Spirituality	378
<i>Francis Vineeth</i>	
Religious Fundamentalism - Denial of Religion	387
<i>Vincent Kundukulam</i>	
Religious Experience of the People Today	403
<i>Augustine Perumalil</i>	
Statement of the Seminar	421

Editorial

We are publishing in this issue the Papers presented at the Seminar on 'Contemporary Vision of Religion' held at Jeevadhara Theology Centre, Kottayam, on February 24-26, 2003. The starting point of the Seminar was that Religious Pluralism is a fact. It is not an accident nor a disaster but a gift of God. As Aquinas says, the dogmas of the Church as the Trinity of God and the Incarnation are evident to God alone, while in the act of faith all true believers touch God and faith is a free gift of God to all God's children. What is common to all religions is this experience of God in faith.

Religions are not, however, ends in themselves nor are they all equal, but shaped by different concerns and in different circumstances. But to be shaped by certain realities is not simply to be determined by them. The Christian Gospel itself is an experience of transcendence over against Judaic religion through the presence of Jesus Christ. There were Christian churches with the Eucharist, episcopate and definite ritual that became radically transformed by the adoption of another religious tradition as in Tibetan Buddhism. Recognition of Pluralism is not a denial of mission. As I have explained in my paper: One Faith: Many Religions, though the divine gift of faith is one bringing humans into intimacy with God, its religious expressions are diverse on account of the radically different questions they address, the particular scope each of them has in view and the final happiness they present to humans. But to be part of a search together to understand what God means in our shared context does not imply that those common features will find uniform expression in different contexts and localities. The complex historical and cultural phenomena require a multi-perspectival approach. There is structure and specificity in the plurality.

What is obvious is that inter-religious relationship has become very complex today. As Fr.T.K.John,S.J., explains in his paper on Inter-Religious Relationships Today, globalisation which has deeply changed economics, politics and social organization has deeply affected religion too. What is needed is to establish healthy relations among the different religions to profit from each its unique contribution to humanity in history. As far as Christians are concerned what is of primary importance is discernment both intellectual and spiritual of both Biblical and communal memory.

There are various ways of bringing these different religions to a certain unity. As Fr Francis Vineeth, C.M.I., explains in his paper Diversity of Religions: Unity in Spirituality, the unborn Atman dwelling in the space of our heart provides a unity of spirituality among religions. While the divisive tendency may lead to fighting, separation and destruction, the diversity of nature and culture can lead to legitimate plurality of religions.

As Fr.Augustine Perumalil,S.J., explains in his paper :Religious Experience of the People Today, experience is the common field where all religions do meet. But the different ways, in which religious experience itself is understood, show the unity in diversity of religions. Pluralism is a fact, but to be legitimate it must be based on a theology of relationship, on a Catholic vision and a Protestant passion focused on the wounded and healing Messiahship of Jesus. There is fundamental antagonism between human communion and the rule of the many. There must be refiguration of Christian attitude to religions away from both exclusivism and inclusivism.

Fr.Vincent Kundukulam explains in his paper on Religious Fundamentalism: Denial of Religion that fundamentalism fixes the essence of religion in a few arbitrarily chosen principles and draws contrasts between true and nominal followers of a religion and between conservatives and liberals. Fundamentalism has no basis in the Scriptures on which the fundamentalists base their beliefs. The core of fundamentalism resides not in the Scriptures but in a particular interpretation of it. It ends up in the denial of religion. Smt P.Radhika's paper on New Religious Movements could not be included as it was not forthcoming.

For Christians, however, the process of unification is in the Trinitarian mystery of the Godhead. Gone is the era of Christendom which imposed a unity of religions from the outside by external authority. The central point here is that the Son of God entered human history as Jesus of Nazareth, enabling all humans to become sons and daughters of God. Incarnation is not a change in God but is what happened on the human side by the inauguration of the kingdom of God. Rather than bringing down God it raises humans to the divine level. The new church has not taken shape fully, but its newness becomes both a value and an ideology in its own right. The resources we carry from the past into the future are much deeper and are much more adaptable than the post-modern, autonomous, rational subject is inclined to believe. "We are able to live between the times because we have a homeland." Secularity is not the abandonment of faith but the recognition that the seculum is the sphere of God's purpose, and not some private religious zone.

One Faith; Many Religions

Implications of Religious Pluralism

John B. Chethimattam

The reason for the antagonism among religions is that the term Religion taken to mean as an abstract ideology. What unites them all is that all share in God's gift of Faith given to all God's children without any merit of their own. Religion is akin to poetry dealing with the uncharted region of human experience. It faces the basic problems of flux, evil and suffering. Religions do differ giving priority to one or other of these and God, viewed as the ultimate answer, is conceived and defined differently. Hence Religions should conceive each other as complementary dimensions of the one Faith. This Paper was presented by Dr. John B. Chethimattam, C.M.I., Professor Emeritus of Fordham University and Dharmaram Vidya Kshetram, Bangalore.

Religion deals with the ultimate meaning of life including all existence. Hence the radical diversity of religions is the most disturbing fact of life for humans leading to religious wars and persecution of those who do not subscribe to one's creed and practice. Often those who are hungry for power make religion a readily available tool to divide people among themselves and to impose on them their will with the deepest possible motivation. For some to respect other people's religions is a betrayal of one's own religion, while for others a pluralistic attitude towards religion and tolerance of other faiths a practical necessity to maintain social harmony and peace. But the basic reason for the diversity of religion is that in history people approached the ultimate meaning of life from radically different problems and with divergent perspectives and a variety of methods of thinking. Hence instead of taking a negative approach to other religions as a challenge and danger to one's religion, people should take a positive approach to them as a standing invitation

to deepen one's own faith and to expand the horizons of one's religious tradition.

The unexpressed reason for the radical antagonism among religions is that religion itself is taken as an abstract and absolute ideology about life and all reality including God and life after death. Hence to treat all religions with equal respect would be basic dishonesty for some people. If all religions are of equal dignity why should I embrace this religion rather than any one of the others? For others, who also take the Parmenidian approach to the objective world the only path of rationality, pluralism emerges when multiplicity becomes an intellectual and existential problem, or when owing to obvious contradictions coexistence seems impossible.. Raimon Panikkar says: "Pluralism is not primarily objective nor say anything about objects."¹ It bounces back to the knowing subject and discovers the inherent limitations of the very process of intelligibility; the subject has struck a radical incomprehensibility, faced with mutually incompatible statements. Faced with the historico-political failure of creating peace on earth, the failure of reducing into a single scheme of intelligibility incompatible worldviews and philosophies, and even "world parliaments" of religions fail to create a universal theology of religion, one is forced to live with mutually incompatible styles of life and contradictory doctrines. One may be at the same time convinced of the goodness of one's lifestyle and truth of one's doctrines, but the opposed positions being ultimate may not be reduced to one's own. In this situation "pluralists" do not give up their personal convictions, nor affirm that there are many true religions, but recognizing in love the other as other, simply continue to dialogue with those systems.²

But the basic problem regarding the many religions is that all believers share faith which is God's gift to all his children. As Thomas Aquinas states, even the most sublime dogmas defined by the highest authority are intelligible to God alone, while in the act of faith one touches God himself. So one cannot write off another's faith as his concern and none of ours. The simple fact is that the different religions are not asking the same questions nor using the same method of approach. The very

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1. Raimon Panikkar, "Religious Identity and Pluralism" in A Dome of Many Colors" ed.Arvind Sharma and Kathleen M.Dugan, Harrisburg, PA Trinity Press, p 30
 2. Ibid pp.22-47

question about a single "true religion" supposes that it is merely a matter of truth or falsehood, while meaning includes various other aspects of reality like goodness, beauty, consciousness, feeling and emotion. So no single human system, limited as it is, can claim an adequate comprehension of these varied facets of life. Besides, God is not a reality out there to be discovered and picked up by human intelligence at will. On the level on which God is, the creature, which does not add anything to him, is not. Hence discovery of God is available to humans only on the divine initiative, and it is through faith, God's free gift to all his children that they can move towards the discovery of God. As Aphrahat, the Persian sage says, since God is incomprehensible to all created intellects, the only way to move towards him is to look in the line of the divine likeness in which humans are made towards its fullness in the eternal Word. It is basically a matter of experience before being a message, ritual or institution. What is important is to investigate the divergent paths taken by the experience of ultimate meaning exploring their divergence from the starting point of faith...

I. The Traditional View

Phenomenologically and genetically speaking religion is akin to poetry. It essentially deals with the uncharted region of human experience. When people fell sick, crops failed, or disasters occurred an easy solution was to appeal to an unseen power behind the scene expressing its displeasure for one reason or another about the humans and their state of affairs. Only when close investigation showed the immediate causes of these phenomena like the disease causing bacteria and elements of the soil unhelpful for plant life which could be discovered and remedied by human ingenuity did recourse to religion became less and less. The uncharted region surrounds us on every side and is practically infinite swamping us and overruling all others, and its commands are absolute since one's very life is being weighed in the balance. No error could be tolerated in such a situation. That is why throughout history people have done terrible things both to themselves and to others in the name of religion. Caught between the constant threat of non-existence by inimical forces, and an abiding hope for survival, did humans first indulge in magic in an effort to bring under control the inimical powers, and on the other hand appeal to mythology about the entry of gods once upon a time into our universe and their constant availability as helpers. So there arose a confidence that these unseen

forces could be placated through ritual and sacrifice in a way combining both myth and magic. Only when human thinking got more systematic through logic and metaphysics did people concentrate on the basic problems that were involved, with focus on one's relationship to an ultimate Reality, still leaving a good deal of ground for imagination and intuition.

There are three fundamental problems facing humans, flux, evil and suffering. For the Greeks experience of change and multiplicity in life and in the surrounding universe baffled them and they sought an all perfect being that would be a principle of unity and stability. The people of the Middle East including the Hebrews, the Cananites, the Egyptians, the Acadians and the Babylonians could not understand how in a world governed by an all-powerful and good Deity there could be evil; Taking the battles and conquests of Middle Eastern monarchs for a model they saw the universe and human life itself caught in a tug of war between two ultimate principles, one of good and the other of all evil. Religion was the choice to be on the side of the good God and fight with him against the principle of evil variously named as Satan, Tiamat Vrtra and the like. The apparently meaningless human suffering was the basic problem for the people of India and the Far East and they thought that the solution lay in a return to the authentic condition of all things in a divine Womb, from which all things originally emerged. Besides, the socio-political situation influenced a good deal the structure of religion. The three religions of the Middle East, Judaism, Christianity and Islam born under the domination of a foreign culture had each of them propose its religion as a contract with its Deity, including a secret doctrine to be communicated only to its own initiates. Each of them, however, claimed a certain universal relevance for its message calling for its imposition on all humans even through compulsion in order to establish God's law in God's world. To this Manicheism, the religion of the Persian Mani added the idea of a Sacred Book special to each religion, revealed by God as a guarantee of its truth. Besides, religion was always a potent tool in the hands of temporal rulers who saw to it that all their subjects followed the ruler's own religion, from which the saying came "Cujus regio, ejus religio."

The recent revival of Asian religions like Hinduism and Buddhism which claim the realization of the Absolute presented either as pure immutable consciousness or pure emptiness as the goal of religion, has

created a certain confusion in the understanding of religions. These religions claim a mysticism, by which one gets lost in the Absolute the ideal and goal of all religion. In response to these Asian attitudes, certain Christian theologians, for example, seem to have lost the nerve to state what Christianity actually stands for and to proclaim that what God has done in Jesus of Nazareth is for the sake of all humans. In 1989 the 13th annual meeting of ITA stated that the role of Christianity was to be a catalyst among religions, to unfold and illumine "the ineffable riches of the religious heritage with which the Spirit of the Lord has entered our land." This would be equivalent to denying the good news that all human beings are called not merely to know what they actually are but also to respond to God's invitation in Jesus extended to all for a Trinitarian fellowship of God through him. For some all incarnational theology is deeply anthropomorphic and inferior to Advaitic mysticism. What is forgotten here is that Incarnation is not a change in God bringing the divine to the human level, but it is what happens at the creature's end raising it to the divine level. Similarly some deny the universal relevance of religions, Jesus Christ for Christians alone, since each religion has its own saviour and special idea of salvation. For them it would be colonialism to state that Jesus is the one Son of God in whom alone all humans can become sons and daughters of God. For yet others religions are like languages: One cannot translate from one to another, but has to think in each one according to its own structure and syntax. So one can be a Hindu-Christian or Christian-Hindu, when one thinks out Christian faith in the Hindu framework or vice versa Hinduism in the Christian idiom³. But unfortunately when one tries to squeeze Christianity into the Hindu syntax it distorts Christianity, e.g., for a Hindu Christianity Jesus was a Jew, Christ is not, but the Logos appearing as man! This would deny the very idea of the Incarnation!

This failure of nerve is reminiscent of the eruption of Greek mysticism, towards the end of the evolution of Greek religious thinking immediately before the coming of Christianity. As Gilbert Murray explains in his *Five Stages of Greek Religion*,⁴ after the initial stage of a cult of ancestors, and an anthropomorphic period of the Olympian deities, Greek religion reached a refinement in the philosophies of Plato

3. Ibid pp. 45-46

4. George Murray, *Five Stages of Greek Religion*, Garden City, NY :Doubleday & Co., 1955

and Aristotle. Then it had a view of religion within the dynamism of nature in the self-contained systems of Stoics, Cynics and Epicurians. Suddenly, however, it lost its nerve and ended up with Gnostic mysticism borrowed from the East, which advocated a total withdrawal from the world, entry into oneself, a rising to divine wisdom, to be finally dissolved in the Divine. In fact in 307 CE Emperor Dioclesian, Galerius and Licinius meeting at Carnuntum on the Danube thought that Oriental mysticism was the way of salvation for the Empire and dedicated a sanctuary there to Mithra, "the protector of their empire". The whole wave of oriental mysticism continued till 313 when Emperor Constantine gained victory over his rivals in the Cross of Christ.. Oriental mysticism was the greatest challenge to Christianity at its beginning presenting Jesus as a manifestation of divine Wisdom. It produced in this line a great volume of literature, which was rejected by the Church, and of late discovered in the Nag Hamadi Library. This negative goal of religion did not appear authentic nor appeal to many. The morality for its own sake of the Stoics and the "dog's life" embraced by the Cynics naturally insisted on the unity and authenticity of human nature and opened the way to the religion of Jesus Christ, the one Son of God incarnate in whom all humans were united in their move to the final end.

What Christianity actually did was to make the Gnostic and Oriental mysticism stand on its head! Instead of looking for one's identity in the one divine essence, outside of and additional to which nothing could be, One-alone-without-a-second, Jesus saw his identity with the person of the Son of God, the Logos in whom all things were created.: As Jesus tells the Pharisees in St.John's Gospel : "I know where I have come from and where I am going; but you do not know where I come from or where I am going." (Jn 8:14). The seven "I am" statements of Jesus in John show Jesus' vivid consciousness of his identification with the pre-existent Logos eternally proceeding from the Father. Incarnation was not any change in God or of the divine person of the Logos, but what happened in Jesus of Nazareth. He had an experience of intimate relation to God as Father. Jesus was a real human being, and not a god appearing as man as Gnostic Christians tried to make out. But the focus was not on the human individuality of Jesus of Nazareth, but on the universal meaning of that individuality as the Son. That is why St.Paul says that he did not care to know Jesus "according to the flesh", but places the stress on his constitution as the Son of God through the resurrection in power (Rom.1:4). Christian missionary activity is event-centered

communicating to all what happened to them in Jesus Christ. Jesus is not just one expression among many of the presence and activity of the Logos like Buddha, and Mahaveera but unique as the focal point of human history at which the person of the divine Logos integrated himself once for all with human history through the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Oriental mysticism is based on the dialectics of the exterior and the interior: the interior alone is authentic, the exterior is really unreal. The incarnation presents the dialectics between the individual and the universal. There is a common humanity of all people centred in the first Adam, and they find their convergence in the universality of the Second Adam.

Proofs of the Existence of God

Proofs of the existence of God naturally followed the problematique and style of thinking of each tradition. Before the Greeks came to an intellectual idea of the Deity as the Immovable Mover that moves all things as the supreme object of knowledge and love, they had to pass through several stages of mental development. As Gilbert Murray explains in his *Five Stages of Greek Religion*, earlier there was the feast Diasia of Zeus Meilichios, the Zeus of Placation, who was an enormous bearded snake, a representation of underworld powers or dead ancestors. It was not the worship of the deity but a sacrifice in the form of a feast in which the god had his portion and the worshippers theirs, and it was a holocaust in which the victim was completely burnt to ashes as an appeasement of the underworld powers. Then there was Thesmerphoria, the feast of Demeter and her daughter Kore, in which women of certain magic charms carried fertility symbols like fir-cones and snakes and sacrificed pigs into a deep cleft on the earth, all appealing to the procreative forces of nature. Thirdly there was Anthesteria, which was an appeasing and purification of the dead including the wine-god Dionysos in anticipation of their rebirth during the Spring season. There was an easy transition to the Olympian patriarchal family with Zeus, the father of gods, Hera, his wife, Apollo and Athena his children, Poseidon and Hades his brothers and the rest. The earlier animals were adopted into the Olympian system either as animal members or as attributes of particular gods.

In the stage of metaphysics Plato concentrated on the formal cause of things and saw God as the form of all forms, the Supreme Good which is the Sun of the moral universe illumining the minds through the

intermediary virtues of prudence, justice, modesty and courage. Aristotle wanted to expand the range of causes to include also the efficient and final causes and arrived at the idea of the Immovable Mover. Later Thomas Aquinas systematized these Greek lines of reasoning into his "five ways" making the five metaphysical dimensions of things, their origin, activity, existence, goodness and order the starting points to arrive at the beginningless Beginning, pure Act, subsistent Existence, infinite Goodness and the ordainer of all things as the ultimate supposition of all experience.. Plotinus made a synthesis of Plato and Aristotle and made the infinite Deity the starting point of an emanation coming down to the level of material things and from there by a mystical ascent go up to the final goal of all knowing.

Hebrews saw Yahweh, the heavenly Deity of a people wandering through the desert as the one Creator who in the beginning made heaven and earth, including humans as the first installment of a contract, liberating the universe from the primeval chaos. He is the eternal Wisdom in which all things are fashioned and the Word that executes all divine plans. He is also the lawgiver dictating the conditions of his contract with humanity, in reward for the observance of which he offers security from enemies , material prosperity and final liberation from sin and death..

In India Udayanacharya details the rational arguments for the existence of a Creator of all things and especially the author of the Vedas with its injunctions and prohibitions. But for that very reason both Buddhism and Jainism reject the idea of an anthropomorphic Deity. All the innumerable metaphysical systems committed a logical contradiction when starting with the experience of finite things they postulated a God who would be infinite by supposition and at the same time finite since he would be beside and outside of the finite things. It must have been owing to this acute criticism from Buddhism that Vedantins did not present any formal arguments for the existence of God, since he is presumed by all except the pure materialists to exist. Still Sankara in his introduction to the *Vedantasutrabhasya* starts from the paradox of our experience of I and thou, subject and object, as opposed to each other as night and day. Both could not be true in the same way; only the Subject, the field of the limitless I-consciousness could be authentic and true, though in our daily experience we impose subjectivity on things designating them as mine and objectifying the subject as "I am fat", "I

am sick". etc. This pure, infinite consciousness that is Brahman cannot be known as an object out there, but only in a "non-indirect" (*aparoksha*) way as "That from which the origin etc. of all things".

Religion and Salvation

Another area where religions express their divergence is in defining salvation that is being offered by all of them, though themselves do not save but only indicate the way to salvation. The radical difference is between "redemption religions" and "religions of liberation". Liberation religions like Hinduism and Buddhism hold that nothing new can be added to humans in saving them, except the realization of what they actually are. For if anything new were added it could also be lost, while what we actually are endures for ever. Our problem is that we do not know what we actually are. We are like people who stand on a street in the middle of Benares and keep asking "Where is Benares". They do not have to be taken anywhere else. Somebody who knows the place should simply tell them "This is Benares; you are right in the middle of it." The only thing required is that they should be willing to listen. So also when a disciple is properly prepared to listen, the spiritually adept Master can tell him "That art Thou", What you are looking for is your own Self. There is nothing real beside Brahman. What you thought that you were is not really so. Brahman is the only really Real. Mysticism which recognizes the identity of all creatures in the one divine essence is the goal of all religious endeavour.

Redemption-religions like Judaism, Christianity and Islam have a totally different story. Though creatures are nothing on the level on which God is, they are in their own particular world by God's will, and endowed with intelligence and freedom they are able to listen to him and respond to him. They are his gift and their primary response is a self-gift back to him in love. Further they are invited to grow out of their creaturely condition and attain a deeper fellowship with their maker. They cannot accomplish this with their own natural resources but only through the continued help of God made available through the living voice of God in the Scriptures.

There is, however, deep divergence among religions in figuring out this fulfillment that religion brings. Judaism and Islam demand from humans obedience to the laws of God and in reward for such obedience promise a future of happiness in an eternal kingdom. Christianity, on the other hand, introduces the idea of the incarnation of the Son of God

as Jesus of Nazareth and the reparation of human sin through his death and resurrection. Human race itself is restored from its fallen condition and made into a corporate body the Church. The assembly of the people at the Eucharistic table is a fellowship with the Trinity of God, (sent into the world) to make this world God's Kingdom. The scheme of mysticism itself is altered. It is not simply experiencing one's identity in the one divine essence as Plotinus and some other mystics thought. Jesus actually found his identity in the eternal Word of God proceeding from the Father as Son, and claimed to be at the fountainhead of all things leading them all to final fellowship in the Trinity. As Ps.Dionysius taught inverting the scheme of Plotinus, it is the celestial hierarchy brought on earth following the dynamism of the Word that embraces the whole world and makes it the body of Christ.

This radically changes the nature of the religious ball-game. One can be saved only by becoming a child of God and this is possible only through incorporation in the one Son. (So outside Jesus Christ there is no salvation for humans. One gets incorporated in Christ through Baptism which makes one a member of the Church.) As St.Paul repeatedly states there is a new world order established in Jesus Christ. God who allowed the Gentiles to be guided by the law written in their hearts and Jews by the Law given on tablets on Mount Sinai (cf.Rom.2:14.17) has now established a New Covenant with the whole human race in the blood of Jesus Christ "who was constituted the Son of God in power according to the spirit of holiness by resurrection from the dead (Rom.1:3). So naturally there is no salvation except in Christ. Hence those who having known Jesus reject him for one reason or another, and those having enjoyed the fellowship of the Church leave it through heresy or schism cannot be saved. (St. Ignatius of Antioch, Origen and others declare that there is no salvation outside the Church. "There can be no salvation", says St.Cyprian, "for anyone except in the Church." (Epist.4,4).)

Then what about those who are members of other religions? Since Church authorities were often speaking to Christians in the context of actual conflicts and heresies, the question did not arise. On the other hand, early Fathers like Justin, Irenaeus and Clement of Alexandria held that persons who were "non-Christians" could be saved by the universal presence and activity of the Logos. Thus Justin says: "Those who did that which is universally and eternally good are pleasing to God." They would be saved along with Noah, Enoch and Jacob, who came before

Christ⁵. Similarly St.Prosper of Aquitaine declares in his *De Vocatione*, 2:17 "Those who have not heard the Gospel receive the general help of which heaven has always bestowed on all men." Similarly in 1076 Pope Gregory VII writing to the Muslim king Anzir of Mauritania thanking him for the pardon and release of some prisoners states: "We and you should show in a special way to other nations an example of this charity; for we believe and confess one God, although in different ways and praise and worship him daily as the Creator of all ages and the ruler of the world...And we pray in our hearts and with our lips that God may lead you to the abode of happiness in the bosom of the holy patriarch Abraham after long years of life here on earth"⁶. Thomas Aquinas discussing the salvation of the non-baptized states that to every person who does what lies in his power to do God's will God would make known what is to be believed either through a preacher as in the case of Cornelius of Caesarea or through internal revelation. Hence all persons would have the possibility of making a free act of faith⁷. According to him the implicit act of faith in the natural law leads to salvation through a "baptism of desire"⁸ Council of Trent relying on Heb.11:6 states that faith only is needed for this baptism of desire⁹. Following this Bellarmine, Suarez, De Lugo and Franzelin argue for salvation through baptism of desire even of those who have heard of Christ, but did not believe in him, or had an unorthodox belief, through their sincere belief in God. Similarly Pope Pius IX in his Encycl. *Quanto Conficiamus Maerore* states that those suffering from invincible error concerning the holy religion but assiduously observe the natural law and its precepts which God has inscribed in the hearts of all, being ready to obey God, live an honest and upright life can, through the working of the divine light and grace attain eternal life¹⁰.

But often Church documents consider other religions as systems that happen to be there parallel to Christianity, without inquiring how they happened to be there and how the Church was related to them. Thus the Vatican document *Lumen Gentium* # 16 speaks of "those who without any fault of theirs have not yet arrived at an explicit knowledge

5. Justin, Dialogue with Tripho-45, The Ante-Nicene Fathers vol.I, 21

6. Christian Doctrine, ed. Neuner-Dupuis, #1002

7. In Sent. d. xxv, q2, a 1, sol 1 ad 1um

8. Summa Theol.III,q.68,a 2; q.69, a 4

9. Christian Doctrine #1935.

10. Acta Pii IX 1/3,613

of God, and who not without grace strive to lead a good life". *Ad Gentes* # 7, states that "in ways known to himself God can lead those who through no fault of their own are ignorant of the Gospel to that faith without which it is impossible to please him". *Gaudium et Spes* #22 says that the Holy Spirit offers to all the possibility of being made partners in a way known to God in the paschal mystery.. Similarly *Nostra Aetate* # 2 speaks of picking and choosing whatever is good in other religions. The First Plenary Assembly of Asian Bishops speaks of other religions as a "a treasury of the religious experience of our ancestors from which our contemporaries do not cease to draw light and strength". Pope John Paul II in his *Redemptoris Missio* speaks of the great religions having "saving elements which nevertheless operate in dependence on the influence of Christ's grace" without, however, explaining how they depend on that influence. In the same way in 1991 the Roman document *Dialogue and Proclamation* issued jointly by the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue and the Congregation for Evangelization sees a mere parallel in other religions: "Concretely it will be in the sincere practice of what is good in their own religious traditions and by following the dictates of their conscience that members of other religions respond positively to God's invitation and receive salvation in Jesus Christ, even while they do not recognize or acknowledge him as their saviour." (no.29) .

II. A Changed Vision of History

What is missing in all these ecclesiastical documents is a recognition that along with Christianity and roughly equal to it, these different religions are integral to God's plan of salvation for all his children, part and parcel of the one religious history of humanity and the common heritage of all humans. Is it not rather odd to suggest that Christians who form less than one third of humanity is God's main concern and that the rest two thirds are there by accident. Coming at crucial moments in human history each one of them faced a particular socio-cultural issue in translating into life the one faith God gives to all his children. Jesus born a Jew and faithfully following all his life the Judaic tradition did not abrogate Judaism, nor did he come to found a new religion. What started as a reform movement in Judaism through historical circumstances ended up as the new religion of Christianity. The contemporary world which has seen the emergence into world consciousness of the many religions has challenged the traditional

Western concept of history which was actually initiated by Augustine who with his Manichaean leanings opposed the spiritual and immutable City of God to the changing secular city of the human. According to Augustine all true progress was necessarily spiritual, and divine providence and spiritual salvation were the ultimate factors represented by the Church and its magisterium, while secular history with its passing values and its fluctuating and often negative progress had only limited value. Truth itself was understood as absolute and objective and the Divine self-disclosure in history was reduced to truth statements about the Trinity of God, the divinity of Christ and the like.. Finally with the declaration of Christianity as the state religion, it systematically destroyed other cults and religions. Strict ethical and theological Puritanism was imposed. As emperor Justinian I formulated it "One empire, one Church, one God/Truth." But Modernity put forward the vision of a unified world and of one humanity. For many centuries missionary activity had a commando appearance. In the 18th century when first a systematic theology of mission was attempted Schleiermacher stated that mission was preaching not simply the naked Gospel, but the European culture inspired by Christianity. So for long centuries Christian mission was a call to conquer the world for Christ.

But various intellectual movements in Medieval Europe like the forward looking Humanism, the backward looking Italian Renaissance, and particularly the Reformation all emphasized human life and its immediate inherent value and rejected the strict divisions between different realms of human knowledge. These turned the attention from the purely metaphysical conception of religion as a system of transcendental truths. The new geographical discoveries and encounter with new peoples and their religions questioned the particularity and uniqueness of the Christian claim. Reformation was the direct consequence leading to a rebellious and self-determining individualism, asserting the individual's conscience against the established Church, its beliefs, rituals and organizational structure. The discovery that millions of human beings who were not Christians lived virtuous lives and were apparently saved was rather disconcerting to traditional believers. The scientific revolution initiated by Copernicus, Kepler, Galileo, Newton and others brought about a confidence that various problems of humanity could be solved through science alone without necessary recourse to God and religion. Descartes and Kant effected a 'Copernican revolution' in philosophy by enthroning reason as supreme

authority in matters of knowledge, transferring to it the infallibility formerly ascribed to Sacred Scripture and the ecclesiastical Magisterium. Protestantism was sensitive to this development of Western thinking. Liberal Protestantism tried to interpret Jesus Christ in the light of the Enlightenment and liberal historical criticism tended to explain the Bible as a purely human book. For Kaesermann and Bultmann history was merely the occasion of salvation rather than its bearer. But when science failed to live up to its expectations and revealed its destructive core there is a certain return to religion with often an irrational fundamentalist streak. Many of the factors that supported the Euro-centric hegemony of Christianity have now disappeared. The four centuries of Western political, military, economic and cultural hegemony apparently ended and other power-centres have emerged. The hope of indefinite technological, scientific and industrial progress appears rather ambiguous on account of the destructive powers hidden in them. There is an evident shaking of the foundations of modern culture in most industrialized nations.

But the problem is that Catholic theology remains untroubled by the concerns of Protestant theologians about history. By making an absolute distinction between natural and supernatural, between knowledge gained from nature and what was revealed by God in history, between reason and faith and between the universal secular history and salvation history Catholic theologians managed to maintain a superior position for the Church over other religions. Even Karl Rahner draws a distinction between secular history and salvation history, which occurring in the former gives it its meaning. But since grace is offered to all the distinction between the two would be merely formal and not material.

Conclusion

As Aquinas himself states, the truth of the dogmas defined by the Church is known to God alone, while in the act of faith which is available to all believers, Christian as well as non-Christian, it is God himself we touch. So are we not closer in faith to a believing Hindu or Muslim than to a Christian who merely recites the Creed without any real faith? Salvation takes place in history and all history is sacrifice. It is the same God who reveals himself in nature, as well as through disclosures to individuals in history. Even the revealed truth has to be received by human intelligence. As Boethius held already in the fifth century, salvation is the natural course of events in history leading to the final

goal of creation, and not some particular part of it. There is, however, no faith that remains purely in the interior of the human without being expressed in ritual, morality and love of the neighbour. So the importance of the organized religion is that it supports and fulfills externally and socially the faith that is already supposed to be there. This divinely given faith is the common factor of all religions. What they individually contribute is the particular manner in which that faith is translated into life.

Hence the plurality of religions can be a disadvantage and also a positive benefit. Exposed to different vested interests and material concerns what is fundamental in faith may be easily sidelined and the trivial and unimportant take central stage and fundamentalism is a real danger. So heresies imply deviation from basic truths and schisms indicate quarrel about authority and privileges. The concern to keep people occupied may lead to ritualism, superstition, endless religious feasts and pilgrimages. On the other hand no single religion can take care of all divergent concerns of cultures. So religious pluralism is a gift of God. Every new religious movement can capture the attention of people only by putting the finger on one or other fundamental truth that is being neglected by the traditional religion. No religion starts by itself but only as a counter-cultural movement. Buddhism and Jainism arose criticizing the ritualism and caste distinctions of Hinduism. Christianity arose as a reform movement in Judaism. Islam came forward as a criticism of the religious imperialism of the Byzantines, of the Persians and of the Abyssinians. These new religions have to be judged in light of the old religions which claim for themselves infallibility and absolute authority of truth, and at first the new comers are treated as deviations and heresies. They in turn become orthodoxies when they face new challenges in changing circumstances and new movements spring up. Today many new religious movements and churches have sprung up in the main-line religions of yesterday. Only a positive approach to these new religions, a willingness to learn from them and to correct old mistakes can avoid conflicts and religious wars.

Inter-Religious Relationships Today

T. K. John

Today Religions have to come together since they are part of a unifying force for a world that is falling apart on account of economic, political, and social rivalries. Every single culture and society is being challenged to redefine its identity and interact with other cultures and ideologies. Religions which tend to deviate from their true goals are called upon to vindicate their original claim of being the guardians of ultimate meaning of life. Dr. T. K. John S. J., from Vidya Jyoti, Delhi who has been very much involved in several national and international forums, presented the paper.

Introduction

The face of religion is blots-filled. Great ones of humanity like Jesus of Nazareth, Siddhartha of Kapilvasthu, Mohammet of Arabia, Sankara and Gandhi of India ennobled and enriched the human species by bringing forth what was best in their deep broad minds and hearts. Part of their vision and insights got organized and came to be known as religions. At the dawn of those religions they were fresh and authentic. During their primal days they did contribute to the transformation of the face of the earth by humanizing the savage in all civilizations. While today greater part of the West is without 'religion', India and the Islamic world are unwittingly equated with fundamentalism, communalism even terrorism in some circles. Are religions willing and wanting to redeem themselves before they set out to redeem others? That is the challenge today.

1. Winds and Counter Wind

Two powerful currents have been battling for supremacy among religions today, one dreadful and the other holding promise and hope. 'It looks like the end of the chapter' is the feel of many watching the fury and fiendishness of the former. It deals another religion as an inveterate

enemy. The friendly relationship among religions that was on the increase, result of much experimentations and abundance of goodwill, has evaporated. Supply of oil to maintain the glow in the actual relationship seems to have suffered a severe blow by a series of events in recent times.

So it is that people exclaim: 'Religions on Suicide Course', 'Religions on Colombia Track', 'Self-annihilation through Annihilation of the Others', 'Religions as block to Development' 'O Religions, What is your agenda for the People', "Relationship among Religions has plummeted"-- are among the anxiety-filled expressions of quite many Indian citizens in the land of religions! Aghast at the rising tide of multiple forms of fundamentalism, especially religious, and violence and ravages caused by communalism, spectators of the global scene are ventilating their apprehensions.

There is the other current. It strives to deepen the emerging healthy relationship that has been quite promising. Affinity among religions has been the axis of the new bonds. Various forms of exchange and communication have been taking place. The two gatherings at 'ASSISSI' still remain landmark events in relationships among religions. The centenary celebrations of the historic Parliament of religions, Chicago, is yet another.

2. Need for Fresh Initiative

However, that is not enough, is the feel. We need to forge ahead. Contemporary trends at the world level challenge believers to rally together and strengthen these emerging bonds of friendship among religions, in order to strive together towards the new world that is emerging. From isolation to relatedness is the new phase of current cultures and nations at the global level. From a hitherto cherished identity in isolation to a new identity in relatedness, even merger, is the new exodus. A few indicators may be singled out:

- a) On June 22, 2003, approval was given to a draft European Constitution. In spite of the economic, cultural, ethnic, political, and religious diversity, even historic hostility, that existed in Europe, the journey towards a new European identity as 'uniting' or 'United' Europe is slowly but steadily maintained. With the Treaty of Maastricht in 1993 economic and currency unions at the regional and foreign policy level and security policy at the international level began to be coordinated

with a corporate vision. Even further widening of the perspective has been taking place. Development, support to democratization process globally, to human rights and the rule of law and above all basic freedoms the world over are set to be part of the new corporate vision.

This process further contributes to the desire of nations and peoples to become a 'world community'. We know community emerges where communion and communication among members is actual and effective.

Religions have greater reason to come together. It is incumbent upon religions to be part of a unifying force and exercise its moral and spiritual leadership rights and responsibilities that stem from the very understanding of religion in the society as its meaning dimension. The process is slow among religions these days, but it has to be accelerated. The occasion should remind us all of the duty of restoration of the primordial vocation of religions as they proceeded from the minds and hearts of their founders. Only restored religions can have place in the new world that is emerging, not those with the current format and outfit.

And so we put questions to religions

The first question put to religions by the trends in the global human society can be formulated thus: since 'globalness' marks practically every aspect of the life of any state, industry, finance, media, culture, religion or ideology, TODAY, can religions afford to maintain their isolated existence and functioning? In isolation no renovation takes place for absence of challenge from the other. When in the open in the midst of others, interaction and even fresh forms of osmosis take place, virtual prelude to reformulation.

The following compelling factors provoke the question:

First of all economics of every state, capitalist or socialist or mixed, is being reshaped by globalization of all economic operations and relationships. Its consequences have reached the last unit: the individual. The economy of yesterday is no more capable to handle the problems of today. Traditional economy has to interact creatively with the new market economy. A new relationship is forced upon you, and you have to respond creatively. Withdrawal is suicidal.

Second, sovereignty of the nation, jealously guarded promoted and nourished by hitherto appreciated values like patriotism, nationalism, self-determination, and autonomy, is being redefined. 'My nation' of yesterday has been moving towards 'Our nations' today. Here the

traditional understanding and practice of sovereignty is forced to interact with the new Power relationship at the inter-national level. Individual nations cannot just withdraw into the cocoon and self-constructed penetrable walls.

Third, no single culture or society is without being challenged to redefine its identity, and compelled unwittingly to interact with other cultures and ideologies. The borders of monocultural percepts are crumbling all around.

Fourthly, even the most walled-in ethnic group or tribe is being forced to open windows into other ethnic groups or tribes. Maintenance of isolation is no more possible. The identity of another forces it to redefine its own identity because of the new relations that are almost forced upon you.

Fifthly, the civil society has over the years become most impatient with the conduct of religions among themselves. Due to the frequent tensions brawls arson and disorder that these religions create, and force upon the society, severe condemnation of religions' misconduct has been quite universal. Should this have arisen? Why such brawls?

Sixthly, since religions tend to deviate from the true goals of religion as such, a high degree of loss of trust and confidence is writ on the face of the believers themselves: 'religion is irrelevant', 'religion is obsolete.' Negativism in relationship among religions is forced to retract, adopt positive interaction with other religions, and together be the civilizing force when society becomes disorientedness in critical times.

Seventhly, religion quite often seems to fail the expectation of the progressive minded section of the society that is advancing fast in terms of discoveries in the realm of knowledge, in the growth of human consciousness, through science and technology. Empirical and philosophical knowledge systems and tools seem to express dissatisfaction with religions that seem not to grow with the times but often regress into archaism.

In other words religions today are called upon to vindicate their very claim itself. And therefore, religions face the challenge to assemble on one platform to examine these apprehensions and authenticate their primordial claims. In brief inter-religious relationship is forced upon religions.

b) The forthcoming World Social Forum is another major event that challenges world religions to forge a permanent effective bond for a

more humane society. Many human rights organizations and peoples' movements too forge alliances, and line up with the Forum to strengthen their stand against the steady erosion of the rights of the many deprived and oppressed sections of the world. Thousands of N. G. O. s, peoples' movements, civil rights and other organizations, large and small, are going to assemble in Bombay next January. The growing networking of these movements is truly phenomenal. The combined effort is hoped to help restore eroded values and causes at the national and international level. This movement is becoming a major corrective to the collapse of values due to the monolith of economic globalization.

People interested in the humanity are forging ahead but religion is unmoved, it would appear. Signs of a stable active and committed world forum of religions to stand by and argue for the human person, for a just and humane social order at the national and international level, especially in matters concerning the full development of the human person like rights, freedoms and values, seem not to appear on the horizon. World Council of Churches has brought most Protestant denominations together and has been advocating the cause of the human person worldwide. Ecumenism at the Christian world level also has been making strenuous efforts to bring all Christian denominations together. But an effective world body of all the religions of the world is yet to emerge. The American noonday murder of Iraq could, perhaps, have been prevented by a concerted stand by the religions of the world, if it were there. But advocacy of the burning human issues should become increasingly the rallying point of religions in their new relatedness, and not be confined to matters internal to religions.

One reason for this absence may be the growing self-affirmation among religions. The self-propelled regeneration process active in almost all religions has been arousing identity consciousness at the expense of the other. But no more. The trend seems also to further fragmentation. Affirmation of identity has not yet reached the phase of extending hands of strong relationship among religions. The sprout of new forms of religiosity further deepens the problem. The Parliament of Religions, addressed by Swami Vivekananda, has not gone beyond an ad hoc phase. Religions at the global level are struggling to forge one. But difficulties persist.

c) Competition rather than collaboration seems to mark relationship among some of the more vibrant religions in many regions. Resentment

and even protest in the media at the clash of interest among the different Christian denominations after the fall of the Soviet empire and in the wake of the restoration of religion in the former Soviet Union, reveal the hidden competitive spirit that seems to be still at work. Reinforcing boundaries and strengthening one's own fortress has become a preoccupation among many Indian religions. Such trends weaken the existing relationship across religions. New insights gained of bitter experience and growing theologies have not yet been operationalised, one could argue. The same competitive spirit is found at the national regional and local level too.

- d) Corporations that control world industry and economy merge and become increasingly powerful and capable of achieving their objectives. Corporations that were involved in sophisticated and mutually destructive strategies to dominate the market now leave the chapter of suicidal conflict behind and come together to merge. Religions continue their separate identity in ever-increasing self-assertion, and even in conflict. The search for elements that unite is feeble and scattered. We have not yet agreed upon a common agenda for the enhancement of the life of the human community.
- e) The demolition of the World Tower has struck a severe blow to the slowly growing comity among religions. Religions are dragged into the controversy. The mixed crowd in the street, in the work places, in the world of the academics and of research, is watched and scrutinized with suspicion. A vertical split is writ large on the crowd or people everywhere. The unsuspected, hidden in the crowd, may prove fatal, seems to be the apprehension. Terrorism has advanced its sophistication of strategy, subtlety and effectiveness.

It is undeniable, that South Asia presents a dim picture of the worsening relationship among religions. Fumigation of innocent minds with the poisonous gas of hatred has been taking place systematically and with uninterrupted pace combined with a pugnacious strategy. Forced widening of already existing cleavages, fuelled by the memory of feuds in the sub-continent, and patronized by all hues of the revivalists, has been seeing to the undoing of the creative labours of a generation of constructive workers like Gandhi, Martin Luther King and others of their kind. Distribution of provocative religious symbols, sprouting and proliferation of cultural organizations that on a regular basis promote and disseminate communal ideas utilizing the common media like the

literature, the theatre, traditional arts and science, are part of the new era of religious affirmation and exclusion, of love for one's own flock and bitter hatred against the other. Parks, public roads, 'maidans' etc are now witnessing increasing number of 'religious' conventions with communal flavour. Religious processions, healing conventions, spirituality imparting *sadhana* centers, are vying with each other for greater and greater self-assertion.

To what effect? Have these contributed to a hastening of the coming together of the human spirit? It seems not. Have these activities augmented the humanizing force in the society? Again the answer seems in the negative? The answer is given by Prof. K. N. Panikkar, who observes,

"The resulting social hegemony of religious discourse legitimizes religious social division. Consequently, the Hindus, the Muslims and the Christians have emerged as separated entities, not only in their personal and domestic lives, but also in social existence. As a consequence, a transition from the communitarian to the communal has been taking place, slowly but steadily... The communal idea is thus imbedded in society. The social base of all secular parties has been eroded and a fairly large section of the population has become ideologically communal, even if not politically so." (PUCL BULLETIN, August, 2003). The truth in the analysis is disturbing.

Will India be ever able to neutralize and dissipate the poison that is being injected into the body politic by communalists is the disturbing question in the minds of the well-intentioned in all religions and members of the civil society in the sub-continent. Will religion that reflects the noblest and the deepest in the human be able to purge the society of this fast spreading irreligious poison in the name of religion?

f) Search for the 'black box' follows air crashes. There is a 'black box' that controls religiosity in all religions. This determines human behaviour both individual and collective. The reference is to the role of the scriptures in relationship across the border and within. Currently operative categories like exclusion, uniqueness, global reach and similar trends do send adherents of religions on collision course. The source of the tension is traced to the core of scriptures that invoke divine authority for establishing its identity and claims. There is uniformity in the claims among religions: that the different scriptures trace their origin to the One Supreme. But there is diversity at their expression, articulation and

enforcement. This is the area of the conflict. The growing shadow of global fundamentalism, an offshoot of theological or scriptural positivism, swears by this religious literature. The existing rather tenuous relationship among religions does not receive nourishment to grow because of these factors.

g) Shared religious shrines have been a unique feature of India's religiosity. Shared Hindu-Muslim shrines, festivals, celebrations, cultural practices, had been a distinctive feature of the Indian social ethos. Such shrines provided religious space for adherents of divergent religious traditions. There is an abundance of such shared shrines in the subcontinent. Yoginder Sikand in an unpublished research paper refers to

"the still widespread popularity in large parts of the region of shared religious traditions which bring together Hindus, and Muslims, and, in some cases, Sikhs as well as Christians in common worship and ritual participation. These liminal traditions are, by nature, ambiguous in terms of clearly defined communal categories, defying the logic of neatly separated and demarcated communities defined on the basis of a reified, scripturalist and essentialised understanding of religious identity. Faced with religious movements for 'reform', 'orthodoxy', such traditions have increasingly come in for attack, as powerful organizations seek to redefine them." (Yoginder Sikand,).

The acceleration of the movement towards a coming together of religions has slowed down by the forced widening of the gulf. The large number of shrines with ostensibly multi-religious patronage by devotees from different religions provided rich foreground for popularizing and deepening the current inter-religious exchange and communication that has been taking place at the level of scholars. These are now under assault by revivalists among Islam, Christianity and Hinduism. This trend is ominous for inter-religious relationship. Efforts at demarcation of religious border is being intensified by the narrow-visioned propagandists among religions.

h) Increasingly irreligious and an overly earth-bound 'secular city' co-exists with the 'the temple-city' with its vast world of religions. In the former 'city' the methods proper of the physical as well as the social sciences have been cultivating and deepening the taste for and reliance on verifiability as a criterion for truth and certitude. The phrase 'scientific temper', popularized by Nehru in a tradition-bound culture, indicated

the growing influence of rationality in all walks of life. Decadent values, perceptions, traditions and rituals stood exposed to the gaze of reason. These were then discarded as obstructing growth and development. 'Progress' was the key word. Religion figured among the less exciting concerns in the 'secular city'.

The 'temple city' woke up and pushed the agenda of the 'secular city' back. A heightened consciousness has been animating the growing number of believers. Two distinct trends mark this consciousness. One centripetal: growing self-discovery, search for the roots, and self-assertion often aggressive and exclusive, and strongly fundamentalist. Fundamentalism, an offshoot of this trend, has been striking root globally. Second, centrifugal: marked by cautious interaction with the other believers, walkers along parallel track, co-pilgrims. Animals like monkeys reach out to the dangling fruit on swinging branch with one hand, having made the grip on the tree-branch secure and tight with the hind legs tail and the other forehand. Reaching out to other religions in the form of inter-religious relationship and exchange has been taking place like that. It is marked by certainty at home and caution abroad.

3. Time Ripe for a New Culture of Relationship among Religions

- i) Since knowledge of the God, with the assistance of philosophies as well as science, has grown phenomenally over centuries, what explains this almost global phenomenon of FUNDAMENTALISM, the refusal to redefine, restructure, and reformulate all that is held by the adherents as 'foundational' in the wake of new insights gained by the human family.
- j) Are there not abundance of resources in religions that will enable them to forge new kinds of relationship that are *worthy of true religions* among them? If religion cannot deal with another religion as religion, is not the very identity and intelligibility of religion negated absolutely? To illustrate.

Religions swear by the name of God. Seers and the god-fearing in religions have been ever so fondly describing God as truly large-hearted and tolerant even of God's deniers. God is love-filled, incredibly tolerant of the mistakes of the humans, and generous even to the stingy. God is compassionate and forgiving even to the offenders, we are told. Author of unimaginable diversity in all its complexity in His creation, the Supreme is dishonoured by the devotees when they claim or demand even rigidly enforce hegemony and homogeneity, quite logically. Given this popular understanding of God, should not religions manifest all

these traits in their very being and manifestations? On the contrary, what is being sown around are seeds hatred, exclusion, narrowness of perception, intolerance of the dissenter and the different, rigidity and dogmatism in all areas of life, even bigotry and irreligious callousness! All these are done in the name of religion. Time has come for effacing these traits and allowing the true essence of religiosity to surface once again. It has to reshape the face of the earth now smeared by demoniac traits: cruelty, fraud and deception, animosity and hostility.

Removal of sorrow marked the beginning of many a religion. God attending to the sufferer is the interpretation of the events. Prophets in the early part of the Bible, and Jesus in His times, were closer to the knocked down and those lying by the wayside, and taking such to the nearest inn to apply healing oil for recovery of health. But those who profess and enforce religion pass by such victims. Worse, they seem to add to the number. Religion's eyes on the intricacies and subtleties of SIN in the human community seem dimming. *The Kairos Document* (Indian Edition 1986, Indian Social Institute, New Delhi), published by the agonized Christians in South Africa in the inglorious days of apartheid, had this challenge to Christianity. It demanded of the Church to move beyond the mere 'ambulance ministry' to a ministry of involvement and participation:

"The Sunday services, communion services, baptisms, Sunday school, funerals and so forth...All these activities must be re-shaped to be more fully consistent with a prophetic faith related to the Kairos that God is offering us today. The evil forces we speak of in baptism must be named. We know what these evil forces are in South Africa today. The unity and sharing we profess in our communion services or Masses must be named. It is the solidarity of the people inviting all to join in the struggle for God's peace in South Africa. The repentance we preach must be named. It is repentance for our share of the guilt for the suffering and oppression in our country".

What then is religion's understanding of its duties and obligations to a society troubled by countless puzzles and problems? What should be the relationship of religions among themselves so that it can assume a concerted, meaningful, and intellectually stimulating corporate leadership in the society that is ever in search of the new.

k) Finally, claims of religions to possess unique knowledge valid for all time, for all places, and for all peoples, is being challenged by the

growing human consciousness. Is a subsequent generation irrevocably bound by the heritages that is transmitted and reach it from the past? Should the present generation be absolutely bound by the gains and achievements of the primordial era accepted as binding on the subsequent, all sectors including claims to revelation? Should we uncritically submit to the primordial religious insights, claimed to be revealed and hence normative for ages to come? What is the responsibility of one era in terms of self-determination, and what the criteria?

Answers to these weighty questions have to come. The best course will be since all religions are under assault it is wisdom to make a concerted effort to respond by all the religious leaders, vicarious or otherwise.

4. Priorities and first Steps

When we consider how to construct healthy and mutually beneficial relationship among religions, it is important that we set our priorities. Topmost in the list of priorities is that we notice the urgency of the situation. Since relationship among religions in our land is in an advanced stage of deterioration, its rectification should be our first step. Only when the decomposed stuff inside the system is cut open and squeezed out can the next step, healing and regeneration, take place. Two major requirements are:

a) Ensuring appropriate mental and psychological framework. How does the mind respond to fresh data? As it passes from year to year, decade to decade, era to era, confronts new situations, fresh insights and developments. These may be from within the community or from the wide society at large. How does it handle the new insights?

Two possible responses are likely. The mind may welcome, affirm, and endorse the new. A creative mind will feed these new into the existing totality, interact creatively and critically, accept and assimilate the positive, and reformulate its identity. A non-creative mind refuses to interact with new insights, and withdraws into the self-sufficiency marked chamber within. It becomes the breeding ground for fundamentalism. Illustration: in the course of last several decades, encounter of religions in India was marked by a diversity of responses: acceptance, indifference, suspicion, antagonism and hostility.

The history of Christianity in its relationship with other religions is marked by approaches like negation and conquest of other-religions, or

indifference or ignorance of other religions. Gradually interest in other religions began to develop which led to experiments like inculturation, recognition of other religions as having certain values, and finally inter-religious dialogue. The last phase was marked by definite recognition of other religions as religions, an altogether fresh step.

But there has been delay in recognizing the implied consequences upon the hitherto existing mental framework. Chief among them is: reformulation of one's identity influenced by the above exercise. Otherwise there is no growth in knowledge. This is the law of growth. This is being innovative and creative. In such a process elements in the heritage found to be no more tenable are discarded.

For religious people this is difficult and painful. What is inherited as sacred remains so for all time. Veneration of the past is a main difficulty with religions. The present and the future are slow to enter into the mental framework that cherishes exclusively the past.

b) The next requirement is careful and sincere attention to the grievances among religions. History of relationships among religions has been a bitter and scandalous record of feuds, combat and mutual destruction. These records are part of the 'heritage' transmitted to posterity. The inherited mix of grievances is reactivated. The result befouls the atmosphere. Bitter conflict, indifference, rivalry or hostility mark relationship among religions. India offers apt example today.

Deep listening to the stored up grievances of each religion against other religions is required. For this one should prepare favourable atmosphere in which free and frank communication of grievances can take place. This, of course, calls for adult and mature dispositions.

Avenging historic wrongs are, rightly or wrongly, considered as declaration of self-assertion and dignity. But reactivation of the painful memory of the past defeats or humiliation is met with an equal proportion of ferocious might, often in the form of retaliation for the inflicted wrongs. Rarely does a culture or individual resist this popular collective urge to vindicate one's tarnished honour. Some individuals like Gandhi showed remarkable spiritual- moral strength and statesmanship when, in spite of the personal (kicked on his dark face by the white man, thrown out of the train illegally while in South Africa) and collective wrongs (colonial domination), treated the wrong doers the English with magnanimity and statesmanship. There was no revenge over the past wrongs, as against what an Idi Amin did to the Europeans in Uganda.

The great challenge and opportunity for religions today is: can they free themselves of culture-bound limitations and release its real inner liberative and healing power so that the past does not exclusively influence its present behaviour? If undoing of the past wrongs are going to be a criterion for self-affirmation, millions of places, shrines, forts, kingdoms and cities need to be re-visited for the sake of recovery! God forbid such efforts at vindication!

Such an exercise needs to be disciplined, objective, truth-motivated and based only on ascertained or ascertainable data. Communications should be marked by dispassionate presentation, scientific in the manner of checking the source of the data, after scrutinizing them whether actual or fictional, motivated or under compulsion, partisan or favour seeking. Acceptance of truth is healing.

Surgery is normally adhered to only as a last resort. Similarly, fearless and frank revelation of cultural wounds, religious humiliations or discriminations need to be revealed, with a view to gaining serious attention since such wantonness has proved to be serious blocks to a healthy relationship among adherents of various religious persuasions. The Roman Catholic practice of sacramental confession has also the benefit of bestowing psychological healing too since what has been committed is honestly owned.

Such ventures demand evolving a suitable dynamics to de-educate ourselves in order to free us of mindsets and dispositions inducted into us from early childhood. Born in a particular community, and sharing a particular culture, we are shaped by the ethos prevailing in it. The fact that existing religions and cultures are shaped by mono-cultural, mono-ethnic, mono-religious creeds, rituals, values, customs and world-views, should remind us of the constraints.

The more one is rooted in one's culture, religion, or community, the more it is difficult to enter into another's world. And without entering into another's world, it is impossible to have creative and mutually enriching relationship among religions. Here perhaps is the most difficult problem in inter-religious relationship. But awareness of this substantial block on either side can facilitate interaction.

In order to lay strong foundation for actual and functional multi-religious culture, our attention should go to the earliest days of the child when the amenability of the child to influences is high. Along with the slow initiation into one's own home rituals and belief systems of the

religion of the parents, it is desirable that the child is introduced into aspects of the same of the neighbourhood kids in a positive manner. Unfortunately cautions and bans mark children's acquaintance with the faith practice, symbols, songs or prayers of the neighbourhood children born in another faith.

This should be carried on at the different levels of education. There is the raging controversy about it. Early phase of 'secular India' ignored the pluralist nature of Indian religiosity in education. They had their reasons. Advocates of Hindutva are making vigorous efforts to introduce a particular version of religious India. But this effort is vitiated by the kind of lopsided and even prejudiced 'religious education' that is under way. Elsewhere in the world varied efforts are under way. The problem is complex but the cause is important and none can afford to ignore it.

Deep relationship with people of other religions is established on the bedrock of affinity with the inner core of the mutually differing religions. Affinity with the other faiths and affirmation of one's own should lead to integral perception of religiosity in its diversity. In order to promote such an integral perception the following notions contribute significantly. First idea of the common origin of the humankind. Second, the essential identity and oneness of the nature of all as humans, since, according to the Biblical category, they are 'created in the image and likeness of God'. Third, the truth that all are called to a bountiful sharing in and participation of the common destiny. Here is a beautiful document:

"All men form but one community. This is so because all stem from the one stock which God created to people the entire earth (cf. Acts 17:26), and also because all share in a common destiny, namely God. His providence, evident goodness, and saving designs extend to all men (cf. Wis.8: 1; Acts 14:17; Rom2: 6-7); Tim.2: 4) against the day when the elect are gathered together in the holy city which is illuminated by the glory of God, and in whose splendour all peoples walk (cf. Apoc.21: 23ff)" (N.A., 1)

i) The origin of religions/religiosity is universally traced to the realm of the sacred, to a divine initiative. At the human level there is the corresponding drive in the human heart called the perennial quest for the divine or the hunger and thirst for God, as well as search for solution to the problem of pain, suffering and death. Since these drives are a universal phenomenon, common to all human hearts in all ages and generations, this dimension could be developed as a major pillar of an

edifice of inter-religious relatedness. We need to build such new inter-religious structures of durable kind. A note of commonality is struck and this can greatly facilitate cross-border appreciation and esteem for all faiths. Foundation for mutually enriching relationship is available here

- ii) The second component is the nature and destiny of religions. It may be varied due to the worldviews that appear diverse. Yet sufficient grasp of the nature and destiny of religions can provide space in the collective mind for mutually relating dispositions. Proliferation of centers where seekers are treated to religious discourses and experiences, to discover meaning of the human struggle, to find solace for the disturbed inner world and to find peace, confirms this drive.
- iii) Thirdly, religions' responsibility to the society is primarily as the meaning dimension of a society in any culture. For religion contributes significantly to the society in its effort to understand itself. It is also the task of religion to germinate values that stem from this self-understanding of the society.

Offering satisfactory explanation to its adherents about the meaning and the myriad problems of existence is part of that responsibility. A perennial question is: 'why suffering? What explains pain?' 'Why poverty misery and inequality in society? What explains cruelty and exploitation of humans by humans? Above all, what after death? It is the duty and responsibility of all religions to assist humans in their efforts to interpret life-struggle and find answers to these perennial questions.

In concrete, moving beyond the current practice of each religion erecting own separate centers, to commonly established *sadhana kendra* or spirituality centres could be a new experiment in inter-religious source participation. In such places interested and committed seekers from the different religions can assemble, mingle heritages and sources, and learn to turn to the divine with hearts in communion and affinity with the faith experience and practice of other religions. A new *sadhna* can be created and a new culture of walking together initiated. Such initiatives can promote and strengthen the fragile link that exists now to make it a strong and universal one.? Walls that separate and divide will gradually come down.

If religion is accepted as of divine-human origin, and communicates things divine and human, the recipients should so conduct themselves as to befit the very nature of the divine. By free and unhindered inhaling

of this sacred and awe inspiring atmosphere our small minds expand, our limited perceptions, vitiated by centuries of inherited prejudices get corrected, and the inner world is adjusted to the divine, and subject itself to be reshaped.

This happens when foundational religious insights are accepted as normative for organizing the affairs of the society. For instance, from the religious insight that all are children of God, egalitarianism as normative for organizing the society can be easily drawn. Religion mediates the formation of society based on equality and guards and protects the society from deviation by introducing appropriate sanctions. Adherents from different traditions by exercising their duty as interpreters of life as a body can deepen the relationship among people of different religious traditions. This can be accomplished with the help of reason, ethics and morality. The collective endeavours of the society are coordinated to establish a socially just and egalitarian, economically sustaining and democratically functioning welfare society. Put it differently, a truly human community is envisioned, pursued and brought about. People of different religious traditions can unite for this unenviable common task and responsibility. Now we stand apart and exhaust our energies on divisive issues.

5. A Small Testimony

It is comforting to realize that it is my early introduction to Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism and Islam, however incipient at that time that generated in me an interest in and appreciation for the different scriptures. In the light of it one is inclined to very strongly recommend that every child in India enjoys its inherent right to know the sources of all religions since that is the reality a child is exposed to at all stages of its life - childhood, places relaxation and especially schooling. Hence along with graded initiation to one's own religious traditions rituals and especially basics of scriptures, initiation into the basics of other religions also should be part of that early upbringing.

6. Early Initiation to the New Culture

Consistent with the same logic should not our young generation be gradually introduced to the sacred places of other traditions also? With proper introduction children could be introduced to temples, mosques, gurudwara, churches, and the sarana.. Exclusive initiation to one's own creates permanent walls at the affective level. To remove that wall,

intellectual convictions of later days are totally inadequate. If the affective is involved during the formative phase of the child, acceptance and appreciation of religious pluralism can be facilitated.

The role of symbols in highlighting a particular ideology is becoming increasingly clear. This needs no explanation. Religious symbols are becoming, unfortunately, signs of divisiveness. Subtle devices and strategies are used in the use of religious symbols. While trying to pass into another phase of our multi-culturalism, it is important that new symbols are created. These new symbols could embody the aspirations of the new India that is struggling to emerge out of the turmoil of present tensions and conflicts.

7. Inter-Religious Exegesis?

Is time ripe for inter-religious exegesis and hermeneutics of religious texts? It may be stated with some risks that to lay deep foundation for creative relationship among religions inter-religious exegesis has to be accepted as an essential next step. This statement is based on the arguable proposition that the progress made by inter-religious dialogue over the years and the favourable climate generated, and the gains achieved, should be capitalized to move further ahead. If there has been a fair degree of mutual acceptance of religions by religions, then such fresh steps should be made. Sources of the emerging common ground should be explored.

Evidently the major source for every religion is Scripture. If all swear by the one God, and since the origin of scripture is ultimately traced to God of the religions, entering into the different scriptures with an open mind should be a responsibility for everyone. And, the origin of these scriptures is mostly located within the framework of a profound experience, which later is called religious experience. A very rich and fruitful milieu is provided for inter-religious relationship in religious experience. This needs further elaboration. Why and how religious experience provides healthy basis for deep relationship among people of different faiths.

8. Back to the Origins for Deep Foundation

What is religious experience? A significant individual is credited with unique interaction with 'God'. The result of that encounter seems to spill over into the person and still more into the human community. These 'significant individuals' (like, Jesus Christ, Moses, in the Judeo-

Christian tradition, Mohamet, Zoroaster, Mahavir, Siddhartha, in other traditions) -have considerably contributed to the enhancement of the quality of human life as result of their transforming experience. How does it happen?

The following seem to mark these primary manifestations or experiences

- a) First, there is intense, transformative communion with a non-empirical Power or Source. Moses' experience on Sinai, Jesus' Abba experience, Buddha's illumination under the boddhi tree, Mohammet's communication through Angel Gabriel, Sri Ramakrishna's diverse experiences (some times of the Mother, some times of Jesus, mostly his mystic trances) are landmarks in this transformative experiences.
- b) Second, significant change is seen to take place in one's personal and thereafter in the social life. At the personal level: striving towards greater self-transcendence and self-disciplining with the objective of deeper interaction with the Supreme. This is accompanied by experience of authentic freedom and peace and compassion for others. This is believed to enable a devotee to become a changed human person. Experience of tranquility, forbearance towards all others, radiance of enhanced humanness, a high degree of freedom from quite many a need and want which ordinary mortals pursue avidly and are saddled with, a proneness to withdraw from the hot pursuits in which common run of humanity is engaged incessantly, - are some of the results.
- c) Third, at the social level the impact is considered significant. Communication of the insights gained in the experience leads to enhancement of the quality of the life of the members of the society. It is here that creative leaders' contribution to the make up of the society is the subject of much discussion among sociologists. The contribution of Jesus Christ to the formation not only of European but also of the world culture, the impact of Mohamed upon the different warring groups in West Asia, Buddha's contribution to the Asian religiosity and culture, are recorded in the annals of world history.
- d) Fourth, sharing the intense experience with the community. A spontaneous yet invisible command goes out from such experience-affected persons to those in touch with them to re-organize their life differently. Insistence on a number of sublime human desirables like rectitude in behaviour, greater concern for others, insistence on and

compliance with the ethical and moral imperatives, take place spontaneously. Further, exhortation to tame the pugnacious element in the human which is responsible for every form of violence, to regulate greed that manifests itself through exploitation of the other, and to discipline the wild in the human expressed through cruelty, callousness and domination, are among these 'inspiring and inspired' implicit commands. In other words, among the primary manifestations of the life of individuals credited with intense experience of and communion with the Supreme and consequent transformation is a decisive enhancement of the quality of human life among his immediate neighbourhood. There is a marked improvement in the quality of the life of the people. The late Prof. Arnold Toynbee would go further. According to his thesis, the very birth of civilizations is to be traced to such experiences of significant individuals, or what he calls creative individuals. Let us briefly survey the field.

9. Impact of Religious Experience on Society

There was reduction of violence and such other evils in and around the region traversed by Buddha after his illumination. The edicts of Ashoka the great statesman are still unsurpassed witnesses to the impact of Buddha's illuminating experience upon a monarch and his subjects.

There was a 'civilizing effect' upon the mutually warring chieftains and warlords in and around Arabia/Mecca as a result of the illuminative experience of Mohammed.

There was qualitative improvement in the life of the different ethnic and cultural groups in and around Jerusalem and places far and near after the 'Abba experience' or Resurrection experience of Jesus of Nazareth. The Sermon on the Mount, and the great Hymn to Love as expressed by Paul are crystallized pearls of practical wisdom from the new teaching that got coalesced and are enshrined in the memory of history. Western civilization is largely shaped by the impact. Interpreters of history like Christopher Dawson, Arnold J. Toynbee, have expatiated on Jesus' influence on the formation of Europe, and through it, on other cultures.

Further tangible sociological impacts on and around the regions where Jesus of Nazareth lived and served, may be listed:

Firstly, evolution of a sense of community consciousness among the diverse ethnic cultural, economic or professional groups: Greeks and

Romans, Jews and 'gentiles', men and women, rich and poor etc. It begins with emergence of new trends like koinonia and communion, i.e. service and fellowship. There is healthy stress on forgiveness and reconciliation, difficult for the instinct-driven nature we share with our friends in the animal kingdom;

Secondly, birth of 'service, even menial and humble, out of Love', as signs of discipleship. The term koinonia or humble service of others conveys the idea.

Thirdly, culture of sharing with others what one has in her/his possession. Fellowship stands out as a singularly Christian value.

Fourthly, greater feeling of solidarity with all and with Risen Lord as members of the Body of Christ the head and the members,

Finally stress on elimination of gender and ethnic discrimination as demanded by the value of fellowship and equality as members of the Body of Christ and all as children of God.

The Mahavira's experience and its impact on the life of the people in our land is remarkable: concern and reverence for life in all its aspects, even of the least and the tiniest, insistence on love (non-violence, as is put through a negative expression).

In our own times the very commendable experiments of Karamchand Gandhi to evolve a synthesis of many of these sublime insights and shape a tool composed of spiritual, ethical and moral power (*satyagraha*) and the effort to bring about greater harmony among warring groups of his times, between the Hindus and the Muslims, as well as his benevolent attitude towards the colonizer, is a good example.

e) Fifth, rites of inclusion and exclusion appear in the process of identity determination. Herein lies the beginning of a major problem for relationship among religions. Initiation rite is a symbol of acceptance by the new recruit of the implications of the primordial experience and through it one enters into the new community, into an enclosure, so to speak. To promote deep and authentic relationship among religions it is required that due proportion is assigned to the original experience, its content, and the initiation rite. For, a major block to the growth of exchange and communion among people of diverse persuasions is the insistence on neatly drawn line of border demarcation.

f) Sixth, consciousness of the divine origin of the new knowledge called scriptural knowledge, product of a unique source of knowledge called

revelation, is a major factor for subsequent development. But it is a key criterion for truth and knowledge in human affairs. The nature of revealed knowledge is supposed to be decisive for the destiny of the human, and the revealer or source of the knowledge is held to be beyond verifiable realm. So what is demanded of the human mind is obedience and submission. The recipient of the revealed knowledge claims special status and share in the obedience in faith exercised by the group of recipients, and all associated with it proportionately share in the demand for submission.

Now, the close similarity that seems to mark the origins of most religions, invites believers in the different religious traditions to consider the stupendous yet most profitable task of inter-scriptural exegesis and hermeneutics. Till now all the closeness and solidarity people of goodwill feel across religions evaporate and scriptures become a source of parting in different ways. The South-Asian subcontinent truly is waiting to be the laboratory of experiments in inter-religious relationship. There is an added weighty reason for such an experiment.

10. Fellowship in Suffering, Fellowship in Serving

The origin of most religions is often in response to some acute human problem. Buddha begins his brooding over the woes of life, over the transitoryness of life. Judaism begins with the experience of human degradation and enslavement of a particular group because of oppression. Christianity continues with the same, and deepens it. Jesus' compassion for the scattered without shepherd is a foundational event. Gita begins with the sad sight of the folly of mutual slaughter in the battle of Kurukshetra, a true reflection of the society any time.

However, once the original experiences are committed to authorities that are expected to handle its wider dissemination in accordance with its true nature, the empirical plain and distress seem to be forgotten, the scope is thrown up towards 'the beyond'. Consequently religion ceases to have eyes to perceive human woes, ears to listen to the cry of the afflicted and the deprived, and hands to apply to the anxieties of the affected people. Remedial steps.

Is it too early to consider further extending the inter-scriptural exegesis and hermeneutics beyond into the actual field of service? The reference to the 'field of service' is meant that transfer of the religious experience into socially transforming alignment. Institutions are expected

to embody the vision and the experience into organized actions to enhance human social life. Every religion in India has its own institutions of service: educational, philanthropic, literary, spiritual, etc. It is true that each has been giving expression according to the specific identity of each religion.

However, time is ripe to raise questions like: could we not initiate these institutions with multi-religious management? It would entail that at the level of vision and execution of the vision, resources from tradition could be brought to merge and become a new force capable of giving expression to the service in a concerted manner? Relationship among religions becomes cemented.

Disputes, conflicts, and demolition of sacred places have become a cultural trait in many a place, at home and abroad. In spite of the recognized and oft-repeated truth that there is only one God, these conflicts continue in His name! Will it be too early to raise the question: why not begin the new era when shared places of worship are slowly experimented? This can send the signal to die-hard defenders of the sacredness of certain disputed places and help reduce the tension.

Conclusion

The development of human reason, of self-understanding, as well as the growing human consciousness, all of which converge on a global human solidarity today, facilitating the journey to the direction inherent in the human caravan, call for creation of suitable environment. It calls for a new CULTURE OF INTER-RELIGIOSITY. Could we increasingly strive for generating and widely disseminating this new CULTURE OF INTER-RELIGIOSITY and thus contribute to the urgent need of authentic humanity and authentic self-transcendence, essential for the right honouring of the Transcendent.

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Diversity of Religions and Unity in Spirituality

Francis Vineeth

The ultimate end of life is not Religion but God. In human nature there is a 'dia-bolic' tendency towards division and a 'symbolic' move to greater unity. Spirituality represents the unificative orientation which tries to bring together the multiplicity of Religions. The all-pervading primacy of the Spirit leads to integration, transparency, symbolism and the synthesis of the heavenly and the earthly. Dr. Francis Vineeth, C.M.I., formerly professor at Dharmaram, presented the Paper and is now the Director of Vidya Vanam Ashram, Bangalore.

1. What is Religion? Why many Religions?

Religion can be a subtle and elevated faith-commitment to Transcendence, beyond the flux of time which influences one's thought and way of life. Religion can also be a naive and even crude worship of an object, an idol, which is somehow related to Divinity. Oscillating between these two extreme positions, religion is usually presented to us as a historical reality with a belief system and worship patterns, with a communitarian consciousness and a set of behavioural laws. The above mentioned definition takes us to both dimensions of human reality, namely, the secular and the religious.

In any case for believers religion becomes an ultimate concern of one's life. For a religious minded person, religion is the ultimate value based on which his/her decisions are made. Religion is thus an all-pervading reality of our lives.

Religion is not the ultimate end of one's life. It is God. However religion is an established way to God. Hence, people accept religion

and walk through the path which religion provides. The human quest for God-experience, answered by revelation, and/or by an experience transmitted through centuries, belongs to the inner core of many religions. As the inner core-experience differs, the articulation and the life-style also differ. If we make a general survey of some of the world religions, we can find certain basic differences in the emphasis they lay on their God-experience.

1. Thus in Buddhism we find an experience of *sunya* and *nirvana* (emptiness and extinction of the flame of desire), silence, meditation pointing to the ineffability of the "divine" beyond all articulations.
2. In Islam the emphasis is on the One, all powerful and merciful God, the Lord of all to whom our obedience, prayers prostrations are due.
3. Hinduism will gladly accept the ineffability of the divine and the supremacy of the One Brahman; but is ready to see him both as immanent and transcendent and ever manifesting in a variety of names and forms. Hence, a Hindu will joyfully sing; *Iso vasyam idam sarvam* (God dwells in all these beings) (*Isa Up. 1.1*).
4. Christianity, while accepting the ineffability of God who is one, immanent, transcendent and omnipresent, believes that this God has been historically manifested in the person of Jesus Christ. Hence, Christianity gives great importance to the *Abba* experience of Jesus and our participation in it.

Since religions move towards an ultimate goal in unison and harmony, as such conflicts are not necessary between these experiences. All are expected to remain faithful to their own religion, yet open to the God-experience of other people. But conflicts do arise.

2. Religion as the Way to the Ultimate

- Religion is not the ultimate, but only the way
- A created way to the uncreated ultimate
- In outlining this way, religion always tries to relate matter to the Spirit and Spirit to matter.
- The ultimate is both within and without, immanent and transcendent.

The earth is the honey of all its beings, and all beings are honey to the earth. He who is the resplendent, immortal Person on earth and who,

with reference to oneself, is the resplendent, immortal Person in the body, he indeed is that which is the *atman*, the immortal Brahman, the all.

Water is the honey of all beings, and all beings are honey to water. He who is the resplendent, immortal Person in water and who, with reference to oneself, is the resplendent, immortal Person consisting of seed, he indeed is that which is the *atman*, the immortal, Brahman, the all (Br. Up. II. 5. 1-2).

- Thus religion is linked with many material factors: such as, place, time, culture, symbols and language etc. which are greatly different from people to people and place to place.

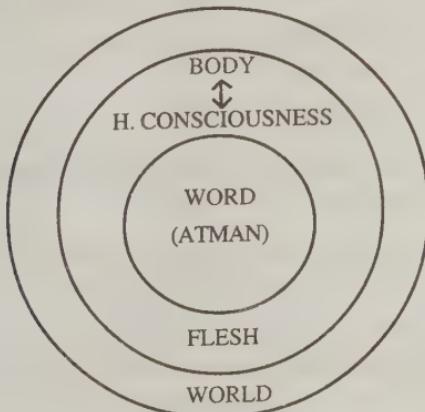
3. The Dia-bolic and Sym-bolic Character of Religion

In our human nature we have two kinds of tendencies. One is a tendency towards greater union; the other is a tendency towards division, disintegration. These tendencies are visible in all forms of life on earth. For example, a tree keeps up its tendency of growth, unifying all its diverse operations, as long as the principle of life is strong in it. With the power of this tendency it overcomes all injuries, cuts and breaks, by a process of healing or sprouting new branches. In the same way the tendency of unification and separation can be seen in human beings. The unifying tendency builds up harmony, mutual understanding and communitarian feeling. The divisive tendency indulges in fighting, separation and finally destruction of all. St. Paul, speaking to Galatians, tells us how the Spirit fosters tendency of unity, harmony, friendliness and peace and how the flesh, our fallen human nature, falls prey to the violent desires of egocentricity, dissents and war (Gal. 5:19-23). The unifying tendency we call symbolic and the divisive tendency we call diabolic. The word "symbol" means that two things fall together into one meaning. Thus, when Jesus said: "I am the vine and you are the branches", He meant that as the vine and the branches go together into one plant so Jesus and humanity come together into one mystical body of Christ. The vine and the branches become a symbol of the unity between Jesus and all human beings. The divisive tendency is known as diabolic which means that two things fall apart. Devil is a symbol of divisive tendency. Therefore, in Latin, devil is called dia-bolus, which means something that has an inherent separatist tendency rather than of unity. So the devil tries to separate us rather than unite. In all conflicts,

whether in religion or secular matters, separatist tendency is dangerous and ultimately destructive. In the distorted rhythm of life after the original experience of paradise, there is a tendency in all of us to develop an ego-centered consciousness which ultimately asserts itself over others and separates oneself from others. The divisive tendency that is mentioned here is not against the diversity of nature, culture and religions. Diversity is something to be appreciated, accepted and integrated into our lives. This is a need for our growth, flowering and mutual harmony in life. Divisibility here means a tendency to discard or devalue the real meaning of diversity and a desire to thrust one's own being forward, insensitive to the needs, feelings and rights of others. From this context we have to see the reason and development of conflicts in religion.

Hence, our two tendencies are: a tendency towards greater union or integration and a tendency to greater division or disintegration.

- A principle of life in vegetative or sensitive life overcomes the dis-bolic tendency. This principle we call *anima*.
- In human beings it is the spirit (*Jivatman*) or soul which participates in the all unifying Divine Principle of life.
- The divine principle of life within us we call the Supreme Spirit (*Paramatman*), the Holy Spirit.
- Spirit unifies everything, including the cosmos
- This tendency is called sym-bolic, i.e., two things falling together
- In other words, the outer layers of our being becomes the symbols of the inner
- The layers can be, for the time being, summarized as follows:



- One may also follow the system of *Panchakosha* presented in the *Taitariya Up.*
- Religion always wants to bring about the synthesis of all these layers.
- But sometimes the outer pre-dominates and stifles the inner.
- From this perspective we have to see the conflicts in religion
- In bringing the outer layers into the center a lot of selfish interest enters, distorts and perhaps destroys religion.
- Instead of the Spirit of God, a kind of the spirit of ego emerges, vitiates the entire rhythm and harmony.
- In India we call this *ego ahamkara*.
- *Ahamkara* is a false or puffed up self-hood which is inevitably linked to something material, as blood of Abraham (in Jews especially at the time of Christ), empire in Constantine's Christianity, a Western cultural pattern of Christianity in the missionary concept of middle ages and of course a Hindutva version of Indianness in contemporary India.
- Instead, if the Spirit leads and becomes powerful this dia-bolic tendency will be overcome.
- Then a religion will be, not replaced, but really led by the power of the spirit, which we call spirituality.

4. Search for a Unifying Spirituality

The overall quest for spirituality today.

- Spirituality is said to be Areopages of the day
- What is spirituality? Spirituality is there only when we participate in the life of the Spirit.
- Spirit is by nature consciousness
- This does not mean that spirituality has nothing to do with the material dimension of our being.
- In reality spirituality is a process of ongoing integration of matter and Spirit or of matter in the Spirit and vice versa.

In truth, this is the great, unborn Atman who is the spiritual element among the life powers. He dwells in that space within the heart, the Ordainer of all, the Lord of all, the Ruler of all. He does not become

greater by good works or lesser by bad works. He is the Lord of all, the Ruler of all beings, the protector of all beings. He is the bridge that holds these apart. It is he whom Brahmins desire to know through the study of the Veda, through sacrifice and alms giving, through ascetic fervor and fasting...

He, the *atman*, is not this not this. He is ungraspable for he is not grasped, he is indestructible for he is not destroyed, he is free from attachment for he does not attach himself (to anything): He is unfettered, he does not waver, he is not injured (*Brahadarnyka Up.* IV, 4, 22).

The text says:

1. *Atman* is within us.
 2. is unborn and eternal.
 3. holds all things together and controls everything from within.
 4. though immanent, is totally transcendent: "not this not this"
 5. remains unattached and free.
- A spiritual person should participate in all these characteristics of the Spirit.
 - He/she must have inner depth, experience of the Spirit, i.e., light and delight from within, which of course enlighten their minds and inspire their hearts.
 - The spiritual person must integrate the material dimensions of one's life into the Spirit and allow the Spirit to operate and bear much fruit.
 - "I am the vine and you are the branches" (Jn. 15:5); "to go and bear much fruit" (Jn 15:16).
 - Compare this text with *Githa III. 30.*
 - He/she must be perfectly involved in all matters of life, but remain totally unattached as the Spirit is (immanent and transcendent).
 - In this level true spirituality is the genuine reflection of the Spirit in one's life.
 - Such spirituality can be a unifying experience of the Spirit in and through one's own religion.
 - Hence, comes the question: many religions and yet their unity in spirituality.

5. Diversity of Religions and Unity in Spirituality

- The core of religion is spirituality
- The core of spirituality is faith
- Faith is a kind of listening, at-tending to the silent utterance of the Lord.
- It opens our inner ear and eye.
- It is seeing things through the eye of God, which St. Ephraim calls the 'luminous eye', we in India call the "third eye".
- Since it is seeing through the eye of God it is a gift given to us by God.
- It is the Holy Spirit abiding within us.
- The experience of the opening of the inner eye is seen in St. Paul on his way to Damascus. "He sent me so that you might see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit" (Acts 9:17) and in the disciples who went to Emmaus. "Then their eyes were opened (Lk 24:31).
- Compare this with *Githa XI:8*: "I will give you a divine eye".
- In Mt. 8:5-13 the centurion asked a favour from Jesus. It is said there that Jesus "was surprised" and he said "I have never found any one in Israel with faith like this" (Mt. 8:10).
- His faith is very much similar to the faith of a devout Hindu. At this stage he has not given up all gods of the Roman Empire. It may take place in course of time. But now he submits to God's presence here and now, and points to a spirituality beyond the specifications of religious configurations.
- All religions have structures of limitation and the Spirit while accepting them always tends to transcend the same.
- Jesus approves the faith of the Roman officer, not simply because it is a faith in him (Jesus), but because of his genuineness, humility and charity (love for his slave).
- When faith in religion is replaced by agendas such as, colonialism, material advantages, political ideologies (e.g, Hindutva) religion gets deprived of true spirituality.
- The one spirituality that goes beyond the multiplicity of religious configurations is the Spirit of the divine light working in human

beings, enlightened by true faith, which need not be uniform in material expressions such as scriptural, liturgical articulations.

- The real spirituality transcends all limitations though limitation is part and parcel of any true religion.
- For a believing Christian the Spirit is the Spirit of Christ. We believe in the Holy Spirit which is the Spirit proceeding from the Father and the Son. We also believe that this Spirit is operating in all human beings of good will. Let us acknowledge this fact, which is very Catholic and recognize the operation of the Spirit in everyone.
- This will give us an opening to pursue the fundamental dynamics of a true spirituality that could be operative in all religions.

6. Criteria to Discern True Religion and True Spirituality

Spirituality in whatever religion should have the characteristics of the Spirit. Two distortions are easily possible:

1. Faith is reduced to superstition or a comfortable form of pietism.
 2. Faith is reduced to rationalization which is largely the level of the mind.
- Primitive religion and perhaps a large number of unsophisticated believers may abound in pietism or superstition. Advanced theological enterprises on the contrary may abound in rationalization of faith which is not true faith experience.
 - The nature of the Spirit must be experienced, lived and expressed.
 - St. Paul clearly articulates in his letter to the Galatians the nature of the Spirit and asks us to be characterized by these gifts of the Spirit against which there is no law.

But the Spirit produces love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, humility, and self-control. There is no law against such things as these. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have put to death their human nature with all its passions and desires. The Spirit has given us life; he must also control our lives. We must not be proud or irritate one another or jealous of one another (Gal. 5:22-26).

- These characteristics are applicable to all religions and we see many of them reflected in the teachings of other religions. This is a sign how the Spirit works in and through many religions

setting spirituality beyond the boundaries of religious particularities.

Here below are given certain principles which would help us to discern certain important and unavoidable characteristics of a true religion:

1. All-pervading primacy of the Spirit
2. Integration of matter and Spirit
3. Transparency of the Spirit in matter
4. Symbolism of nature (seeing the divine in the material)
5. Synthesis of the heavenly and the earthly. The kingdom of God is to be reflected here on earth.
6. Hence, love of all and welfare for all (*lokasamgraha*)
 - On discerning the nature of true spirituality
1. Spirit is by nature consciousness and transcendence and therefore true spirituality is sought in deeper self-awareness and freedom.
2. The nature of the divine Spirit as presented in the Bible and other religious Scriptures must be reflected in the spirituality of any religion.
3. The power of transcendence over division, oppression and self-enlargement should be reflected in the material realms of our life.
4. Genuine freedom, equality and respect for all human beings should be guaranteed. Hence, a spirit of tolerance, appreciation and co-operation.
5. Love is the great unifying force in spirituality and self-sacrificing love for the other is to be judged as a genuine sign of true spirituality.

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Religious Fundamentalism - Denial of Religion

Vincent Kundukulam

The term Fundamentalism was first used as a deliberate reaction to liberalism, but it came to designate one's own position as the only valid position. It breeds a false consciousness among members of a particular group placing emphasis on the most trivial and marginal details of a tradition, often forgetting the dynamic orientation of Faith to the ultimate meaning of human life. One of the main reasons for this fundamentalism is the incapacity to change and to discover true Religion. Dr. Vincent Kundukulam of St. Joseph Pontifical Seminary, Aluva, presented the paper.

Introduction

A vast amount of pain and suffering was heaped on the world by the attack on the World Trade Center on 11th September 2001. No words can be adequate to condemn this event, which was directed against the innocent civilians. This tragedy has brought back into public the discussion about religious fundamentalism. Opinions are divided on the question whether religions can be held responsible for such crimes. Some believe that a true religious man/woman cannot indulge in terrorist activities. Yet it remains a fact that these terrorists adhere to such practices, which are considered to be generally religious. This paper is an attempt to know the origin of religious fundamentalism, its general features, its particular meaning in Indian context and the factors leading to religious fundamentalism. We will also discuss the question whether fundamentalism is native to religion and see how fundamentalism can be checked with the essentials of religions.

We want to begin with a clear and simple definition of fundamentalism. But it is a very difficult task due to various reasons.

First of all, one person's fundamentalism is another person's normality. What may seem excessive to a non-believer could be very real to a believer. Secondly, fundamentalism is a catchword for many a narrowed suggestion like conservatism, evangelicalism, sectarianism, obscurantism or bigotry. This term is often evoked in the context of fanaticism, terrorist activities and communal violence. Due to its vague and multifaceted meanings any attempt to define it creates confusion rather than clarity. Therefore what is being attempted here is an extended description of the phenomenon of religious fundamentalism.

1. Origin of fundamentalism

The origin of the term fundamentalism dates back to the last phase of the 19th century in USA. It was mainly a deliberate reaction to the general liberalism spreading in North America. The decade after the First World War was marked by the increasing degree of scientific and historical knowledge. Some clergymen and theologians attempted to interpret the Gospel and the fundamentals of faith with the scientific tools, which were developed in biblical and theological disciplines. This attempt to say something in tune with the spirit of modernism was perceived by the traditionalists as watering down the essentials of the gospel and diluting it into something easier and comforting to human environment. They felt that modernism built up human pride and this would lead many to reject the help of divine grace and ignore the dependence of the human on God. They were under the impression that modernism made the Church cold and dead.

In opposition to this liberal attitude, a series of books with the title *The Fundamentals: A Testimony of Truth* was published between the years 1909 and 1919 by evangelical and conservative theologians. The term fundamentalist seems to have been used for the first time by Cutis Lee Laws, a Baptist from North America on 1st July 1920 in the editorial of a New York weekly *The Watchman Examiner*. It designated those who were blindly attached to the great fundamentals of Christian faith and vehemently opposed to modern interpretations of the Bible based on new exegetical methods. (P. Lathuiliere, *Le fondamentalisme catholique*, Cerf, Paris, 1995, pp.15-19).

Its conservative supernaturalism was mainly expressed in five doctrines: Inerrancy of the Bible; Virgin birth of Jesus, Supernatural atonement (Redemptive sacrifice through the blood of Christ), Bodily

resurrection of Jesus and Jesus' ultimate return in glory. The fundamentalists raised strong opposition against the historical interpretation of Holy Scripture, which they thought would undermine the status of the Bible as absolute and perfect symbol of religion. This movement was characterized not only by its conservatism with regard to traditional popular Christian beliefs but also by its aggressive efforts to impose its creed on the Churches, on the public and on denominational schools of the country. A political campaign was started in general places against schools, which ceased to insist on obligatory prayer before class, the reading of the Bible and divine service in colleges and universities. It removed from the churches and educational institutions those who did not share the conservative faith. In a number of denominational colleges the teachers were asked to subscribe to the fundamentalist creed on pain of dismissal. It induced state legislatures to pass laws prohibiting the theory of evolution. In short it refused, as it was said, to let a vociferous minority of godless men and women bring America to the brink of ruin. (H.R. Niebuhr, *Encyclopaedia of Social Sciences*, vol.6, 526; S. Fuchs, The Fundamentalists, *Indian Missiological Review*, June 1995, 5-8.)

The growth of fundamentalism in America was closely related to the conflict between rural and urban cultures. It coincided with the depression of agricultural values after the First World War. Its popular leader was the agrarian W.J. Bryan. Modernism was identified with bourgeois culture having its strength in the cities and in the churches supported by urban middle classes. Fundamentalism flourished in those isolated communities where educational institutions were not adequately developed and culture remained static. The rural societies, which depended for their livelihood on the processes of nature and who received least profit from a rationalized culture distrusted reason and doubted the human ability to solve ultimate problems of life. (H.R. Niebuhr, 527)

The main feature of Christian fundamentalists is that they think of their own position as the only Christian position. They cannot tolerate any other Christian positions that can be contrasted with their own. They are the true Christians and those who do not share their viewpoint are not genuine Christians. They consider a non-fundamentalist as anti-evangelical. They cannot admit that different forms of service have all alike been pleasing to God. There is no value in talking of manifold

ways of coming to God when God himself has made known to us the way by which he intends us to know him. To the fundamentalists, noble life, good deeds and saintly character of others do not matter because the human is saved through faith and not by the goodness of any human work. In short there exist two levels of contrast in Christian fundamentalism: namely, one, the contrast between the true Christian and the nominal Christian; and two, the contrast between the more conservative theological opinions and the more liberal. (J. Barr, *Fundamentalism*, London, SCM Press, 1991, pp. 4-6; 12- 15)

2. Religious fundamentalism today

Fundamentalism has cut across Christian world and has become one of the most obvious characteristics of almost all the institutionalized religious traditions of the world. Israel carries out systematically terrorist attacks on the people of Palestine to deprive them of their homeland. Muslim fanatics are reported to be involved in insurgent acts of political terrorism, kidnappings and sectarian violence from Philippines to Indonesia to Thailand to Kashmir to Afghanistan to Algeria to Chechnya and Bosnia. Groups like Jama-at Islami, Lashkar Toiba, Al Qa'ida, etc., are examples of the growing fanatic tendencies in the contemporary Islam. The fundamentalist tendencies prevailed among the Hindus since time immemorial in the form of caste system and untouchability. With the advent of Sangh Parivar movements, who manoeuvred the destruction of Babri Masjid on 6 December 1992, Hindus have explicitly turned against other believers in the country. To deal with the variable forms and meanings that fundamentalism acquired throughout the world is beyond the project of this paper. Therefore we limit our study to India, which will show how fundamentalism grows here along with communalism.

The growing religious fundamentalism in India is not necessarily the same of Christian fundamentalism of 19th century. It is both the cause as well as the effect of communalism and inter-religious conflicts in Indian society. Fundamentalism is breeding a false consciousness among the members of their respective groups. It has emerged in India as an ideology to be a succour in the game of power. Its platforms are beginning to yield political returns. The ruling elites have found the phenomenon of fundamentalism quite convenient to divert the attention of people from the genuine issues and demands. They disseminate

fundamentalist ideology through communal conflicts; a violent clash here and a hostile atmosphere there; a case of discrimination here and another case of blatant partiality there. In one area one group faces the threat and humiliation and in another area the other group meets the same fate. The vested interests of politicians create vote banks manipulating such circumstances on religious base (R. Punjabi, *Mainstream*, 5, January, 1991, pp.18-20).

Fundamentalists of both majority and minority communities have adopted exclusiveness to flourish in the country. Instead of making efforts to seek commonalities, which could be brought forth among various religions, they prefer the literal interpretations of scriptures and adopt antagonistic postures towards other groups. They seek guidance from the societies and persons, which have no experience of living in multi-religious societies. They marginalize the moderate religious leaders. It is important to note that fundamentalism wages a two-pronged attack. First, it annihilates physically the moderate forces within the ranks of their religious groups. Thus the moderate voices of different religious groups are getting feebler in the cacophony of the fundamentalists. Second, fundamentalism tailors the religious beliefs and adjusts the doctrines of a particular faith according to their requirements.(R. Punjabi, pp. 19-20)

The recourse to history has become a frequent technique of fundamentalists. They go back to what they regard as the purer standards of bygone days. This recourse to history helps to do with the culture of people today. This is to infuse in the marginal minds a sense of false superiority complex. This device helps them distort the perceptions of average minds and shape new stereotypes and attitudes. Due to these distorted perceptions they come to clash with those groups and cultures, which do not share these false notions. They view the other with suspicion and cynicism. It gets reflected in their behaviour patterns in the offices, in schools and in day-to-day dealings. Underneath the peaceful society, groups of people are arraigned against each other as adversaries and they get divided on the slightest provocation. (R. Punjabi, pp. 18-20)

To consolidate their hold, the fundamentalists launch pseudo-religious organizations. These groups apparently maintain their independent identity as defenders of faith but extend their support during crucial moments of political mobilization. They adopt militant postures and at times they give the impression of coming in collision with the state. It is

through these groups that the ideology of fundamentalism is diffused in society. Through their mechanizations the 'I teach them a lesson' syndrome has become operational in Indian society. (R. Punjabi, p. 20)

Main characteristics

Here are a few major characteristics of the growing fundamentalism of today. a) A fundamentalist is always certain what he means by the terms he employs. His value system is non-negotiable. The Fundamentalist position is intrinsic to his faith. To ask him to modify it is to ask him for something that he cannot perform. He thinks that a rigid and uncompromising position suits his interest best. He thinks that his is the best system of thought and management that is available to humankind. To argue that there could be a plurality of ideas which could be equally valid is for the fundamentalist a sacrilege; b) Another feature is the moral fervor with which the fundamentalist speaks. He is certain that some people have God's authority to do what they will because they are doing all that in the name of a higher value which is unquestionable; c) The fundamentalist believes that those who do not believe in his value system are evil or are inspired by evil. He regards his victims no longer as human beings but as creatures of the devil. (GPD, EPW September 29, 2001, 3668) d) The fundamentalist reconstructs a golden past through historification of legends and myths. e) The fundamentalist supports communalist leaders by supplying literal and anti-religious interpretations of the Scriptures, which legitimate the exclusion of the other. f) Fundamentalists transform themselves into fanatic groups who become insensitive to human suffering and use violence against their fabricated enemies.

3. Factors leading to religious extremisms

Incapacity to confront change

Stability was a positive value in the Middle Ages. But with the Copernican discovery people came to realize that the earth has four seasons because it orbits round the sun. Change was then slowly looked upon as creative. Change became law of progress. But all are not responding positively to change. Humans find it at ease with a known trajectory than an unknown trail. Changes engender insecure feelings in them as they come to know that many of the values, which moulded their personality in their childhood, are persistently devalued. They find

it difficult to adjust to new habits and values. They feel the foundations of their lives terribly shaken.

To escape from this fear they are in search of principles, which are permanent. They find them in religion. For them they are Religions, that uphold perennial values and principles of life. All through the centuries religions have proposed and taught fundamental answers to human quest. It is not only expedient but also necessary for humans to depend upon God and religion to face squarely the distress and frustration. Religious beliefs were born as a response to humans' existential fear. The problem arises only when this attachment to religion becomes narrowed down and blind. The spirit of intolerance begins when one absolutizes one's experience at the expense of others.

Inability to discover the true religion

The undue attachment to one's own religion happens partly because of the misconception about what really religion is. Scholars of religion identify four elements in every institutionalized religion: external customary rites, myths, ideals and spiritual experience. The customs and traditions remain at the threshold of religions. The aim of religion is not to keep people in the mechanical practice of external rites but to lead them to the level of spiritual bliss. The ideals, symbolic representations and rituals must help the individual enter into the spiritual experience of the Absolute present to him in the universe and in the fellow humans. But the populace often cannot reach the fourth (nth) stage of religious experience. It clings to the customs and traditions mistaking them for the absolute truth. For the common people one who marks his head with sandal is a Hindu, he who lights a lamp in the church is Christian and one who recites the name of Allah is a Muslim. Those who mistake external rituals and traditions for religions take up weapons to protect them. (S. Azhikode, *Navayathrakal*, D.C. Books, Kottayam, 2000, p.100)

False reaction to anti-religious movements

With the advent of the modern era reason became the norm of truth. Secular thinkers, in their eagerness to affirm the inevitability of reason for progress, disqualified religion as superstition. Gods were presented as human creation. Religions were projected as stumbling blocks in the path of human development. They tried to build a society where traditional religions would have no significant role to play in the cultural and political life.

The expulsion of religion from social life had adverse effect. It created a vacuum in the mind. Humans became insecure before the catastrophes that happened to them. They understood more and more that science couldn't give satisfactory answer to the ultimate questions of life. As a result they began to perch again in the limits of religions. Unfortunately this return journey towards religion means for some an extreme imposing of the bygone forms of religion as a solution to world-problems. They think that the reestablishment of the good old "golden age" of religions would usher in a right solution to the present problems. Such an approach is unrealistic because neither one can rebuild one's past nor old solutions can meet the problems of the present. Fundamentalists are those who are incapable of adapting religious values according to the present needs and cultural patterns.

Move against globalization

Another important factor, which contributes to the rise of religious fundamentalism and terrorism, is the phenomenon of globalization. World is in the process of becoming one village. The cultures of the powerful nations are spreading and stretching into every nook and corner of the developing countries through television and Internet. The diverse cultures of the world merge into a monolithic culture. The negative effect of this uniformity of cultures is the disappearance of the "little traditions". The "little cultures" exist in relation to specific regions, languages, races, geographical settings, etc. They don't have the efficient means to resist the invasion of western culture. Their identity as well as existence is being threatened by it. Due to the fear of being removed from the earth, the regional cultures become defensive and reactionary (T. Henri, 'La montée des extrémismes religieux dans le monde', *Le Faits Religieux*, J. Delumeau (ed.), Fayard, Paris, 1993: 740). Since they are unable to fight against the onslaught of an international culture they search support in traditional religions. Fundamentalists isolate texts from Scriptures and misinterpret them in view of disqualifying globalization.

Economic factors

Every society is very sensitive to the privileges, which others possess and are denied to it. Each one formulates strategies for capturing his/her rights. When it is difficult for a community to earn their rights through democratic and lawful means they take refuge in terrorist activities. For example, behind the terrorist movements in Kashmir, Nagaland and

Punjab are the economic interests of those states. K.N. Panickkar interprets the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center as Muslim reaction to the totalitarian policies of America in economic field. He observes that the three sites targeted by the terrorists are symbolic of American power. World Trade Center represents its economical strength, Pentagon the military power and the White House the political supremacy. The American companies collect the major share of the income of the petroleum industries in Gulf countries. The same way the Muslim countries pay a good deal of their road-tax to American companies. The attack on New York is a reaction of the Muslim fundamentalists to the economic supremacy of America. (K.N. Panikkar, 'Matha Teevravadam - Saamohika Manasika Maanangal' *Mathavum Chintayaum*, vol. 82, no: 2, 2002, p.18)

4. Are religions fundamentalist?

We have studied the components, features and causes of fundamentalism. The question that has to be answered now is whether fundamentalism is intrinsic to religion? Why people resort to religion for legitimizing their fundamentalist approach?

When we study the history of religions we come across several incidents where the religious leaders made divisive and pejorative remarks despising other religions as enemies. Crusades are best examples in the history of Christianity. When Islam conquered much of Christian territories and holy places in Europe, Popes instigated the Christians to fight against Muslims. Pope Urban II's appeal for war is very famous:

"I beseech and exhort you - and it is not I but God who beseeches and exhorts you as heralds of Christ - both poor and rich, to make haste to drive that vile breed from the regions inhabited by our brethren, and to bring timely aid to the worshippers of Christ. I speak to those here present, I will proclaim it to the absent, but it is Christ who commands ... If those who go thither lose their lives on land or sea during the journey, or in battle against the pagans, their sins will at once be forgiven; ... What can I say more? On one side there will be poor wretches, on the other the truly rich; there the enemies of God, here his friends. Pledge yourself without delay." (P. Regine, *The Crusades*, London, 1962, pp. 23-24)

The worldwide dismay and outrage caused by Taliban's edict of 26th February 2001 ordering the demolition of the Bamiyan Buddhas

raised a host of questions of fundamentalist nature. The justification offered for such an act of religious intolerance and vandalism is that these graven images offend the religious sentiments of Taliban. Their supreme leader Mullah Mohammed Omar was quoted as saying: 'I ask Afghans and the world Muslims to use their sound wisdom... Do you prefer to be a breaker of idols or a seller of idols? Is it appropriate to be influenced by the propaganda of the infidels?' On 27th April 2001, human rights activist Salim Saboowala was harassed and assaulted by the BJP activists in Mumbai and the books on Pariyar Ramasamy Naicker and BR Ambedkar, which he was selling, were confiscated on the grounds that they carried derogatory references to Hindu gods. (R. Hensman, *EPW*, June 9 2001, 2031)

The mode of expressions that president Bush employed over the September 11th terrorist activity may be identified as that of fundamentalist nature. He posed the entire problem not in terms of secular international politics but rather as problem of faith. Needless to say, for the Americans preaching of Christian faith is curiously combined with political involvement in the world. They are convinced that the USA has a missionary mandate to save the world from unbelief and immorality. This is also to win the support of the fundamentalist Protestant sects whose financial support is decisive for the politicians. Bush gave the proposed military operation a code name, 'Infinite Justice'. The reference was again to the belief that only the Lord can bestow infinite justice. America sees itself as the Lord of the universe. It was not president George speaking but rather St. George speaking. (GPD, *EPW*, September 29, 2001, 3668-3669).

In light of the above-mentioned inglorious stories, can we conclude that fundamentalism is native to religions? The answer depends upon how we comprehend religions. Amongst the numberless definitions that have been suggested in the history of religions, those that have been most frequently adopted for working purposes are that of Tylor's and Frazer's. E.B Tylor suggested a simple definition: religion is the belief in spiritual being. J.G. Frazer defined religion as a conciliation of powers superior to man, which is believed to direct and control the course of nature and of human life. (*Encyclopedia Britannica*, vol. 19, p.103). Friedrich Schleiermacher defined religion as the feeling of absolute dependence. Religion stands for the pattern of beliefs and practices through which men communicate with or hope to gain experience of

that which lies behind the world of their ordinary experience. Typically it focuses on an Ultimate or Absolute, thought of by some believers as God (*Encyclopedia Americana*, vol.23, p. 359)

Sociologists and anthropologists are not satisfied with the above-mentioned formalistic and experiential type of definitions. They rightly argue that religion is a social institution. Religion is never an abstract set of ideas, values or experiences developed apart from the total cultural matrix. As a social phenomenon it has to include the practices of all those who profess a certain faith regardless of whether they conform to or deviate from the teachings of the founder. If we understand religion from its social perspective, religion is to be considered as sources of peace and compassion but at the same time responsible for violence.

The interesting point here is that even while we consider religion as responsible for fundamentalism we don't find the latter evolving from the Scriptures, but from the particular understanding of certain believers. James Barr who has done a thorough study of Christian fundamentalism argues that contrary to general belief, the core of fundamentalism resides not in the Bible but in a 'particular kind of religion'. What is this particular kind of religion? Barr means here a particular type of religious experience the fundamentalists deduce from the Bible, which they think is a necessary consequence thereof. Such a religious experience controls the interpretation of the Bible within fundamentalist circles. The fundamentalist interpretation of the Bible works out as a necessary condition for the self-preservation of their religiosity. Therefore Barr writes, "fundamentalism is based on a particular kind of religious tradition, and uses form, rather than the reality, of biblical authority to provide a shield for this tradition" (J. Barr, 11)

Barr's findings clearly show that fundamentalism exists not in the Scriptures, in the reality or the basis of religion, but in the form i.e. the interpretation given by a group to the revealed texts. To argue the contrary would be disastrous to faith. All religions recognize God as the source of the Scriptures. If the latter were the source of fundamentalism God would be made responsible for all the hatred and violence unleashed by the fundamentalists. If the Scriptures were the real root cause of violence, anyone who is genuinely practicing the scripture-based values should have been intolerant. But that is not the case. The strict and stiff observance of the Bible or the Koran or the Gita does not immediately make one enemies of other religions. For example, every devout Hindu

is not necessarily a VHP activist. Therefore it follows that the Scriptures do not ipso facto lead to religious fundamentalism. As Dr. S. Radhakrishnan observes, in the human mind, the primitive, the archaic, the infantile exist side by side with the civilized and the evolved. All our enemies are within. The impulses, which seduce and the flames, which burn, spring from that inner region of ignorance and error. The struggle between the life-affirming and life-denying impulses is permanent in man. (S. Radhakrishnan, *The Present Crisis of Faith*, Hind Pocket Books, Delhi, pp. 20-21). While believers, attracted by political and economic interests, subdue themselves to the negative impulses they become easily a prey to fundamentalism.

Yet one may ask whether some religions have the potential for fundamentalism since they contain also the interpretations of the Scriptures developed in course of history? In this regard it is worth recollecting the distinction made by A.A. Engineer about religion. According to him we must make a difference between *religion as faith* and *religion as an identity*. Religion as faith has largely a spiritual function and religion as an identity acquires political overtones (A.A. Engineer, EPW, October 20, 2201). The doctrines, laws and the code of conduct of religions are generally the outcome of interpretations made by the authorities on the revealed texts in view of adapting them to the particular context of their believers. Consequently, due to pressure from the believers or due to the influence of experts having extremist tendencies some interpretations may run the risk of fundamentalism. Any group that is violent is always in need of fanatical interpretation of religion to bind its followers together. Thus fundamentalism grows in so far as the followers use religion as an identity. Otherwise violence is not the product of religion. Religion as faith cannot produce a fundamentalist.

Thus even though there is a communal potential in certain representations of religiosity we cannot equate faith with fundamentalism. Fundamentalism originates from the believers who manipulate religion as identity for vested interests. Applying moderate and scientific tools of interpretations, which are developed in religious sciences, we can check the deviated explanations of the Scriptures. Similarly, we can purify religions with the anti-fundamentalist potentials that are inherent in them. Following the September 11th event the leaders of the Islamic movements brought out a statement which reads as

follows: 'We have unequivocally condemned the dastardly terrorist attack on establishments in New York and Washington. Islam upholds the sanctity of human life as the Koran declares that killing one innocent human being is like killing the entire human race. The tragedy of September 11 is a crime against humanity and Muslims all over the world mourn all the victims of the aggression as a common loss of America and of the whole world'. The main role of religion is to bind and to bring together the believers as well as to relate them to a wider and cosmic whole. The study about universalism, pluralism, love and compassion, innate to every religion, will prove that fundamentalism is denial of religion and that it can be resisted from within the religion itself.

6. Religions teach the Spirit of Pluralism and Universalism

The Islamic attitude towards others is based on the concept of creation. According to the Koran(49,13), in spite of the different nations and cultures all are God's creatures, all are children of the same parents. A Muslim has to believe in all the prophets, who came to this world. They have to respect the sacred works of all religions. One who does not believe in them is not a Muslim. "Say: We believe in God and that which is revealed to us; in what was revealed to Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, and the tribes; to Moses and Jesus and the other prophets by their Lord. We make no distinction among any of them." (2, 136) This respect for other religion is also seen in the counsel of Babar to Humayun: 'India is a land of different religions. You must be grateful for that. If Allah gives you power you should not show any favoritism. Don't kill the cows, which may hurt the feelings of the Hindus...Don't destroy the temples and places of worship.... Enrich Islam by a merciful heart and not through suppression (T.V. Muhammadali, 'Bahumata Sauhradam Islamil', *Mathavum Chintayum*, vol. 82, no: 2, 2002, pp. 41-43)

Hinduism is always known for its tolerance towards other religions. For a Hindu who holds this principle of *Ekam Sat vipra bhahudha vadanti* doesn't have any difficulty to accept that Allah, God , or Yahweh as the different names of the same *Isvara*. That is why even the materialist Charvaka is respected by the Hindu believers. One can draw a lot of other expressions in Hindu prayers and hymns like *Vasudaiva kudumbakam*, *Atmayat Sarva Bhoodhani*, *Sarve Bhavantu Sukina*, *Loka*

Samasta Sukino Bhavandhu, which indicate that the universe is one family and all men are its members.

The Christian vision of the world and the human is based on the theology of creation. The book of Genesis tells us that God created the human in God's own image and likeness. (Gen 1: 26-27). Consequently, humans belonging to various religions, cultures, races, etc possess God's image. Whoever lives according to the voice of his conscience is doing the will of the Creator. Christian openness towards others is marked by Jesus' respect for the believers of other religions. Even though Jesus was born as a member of Jewish community he honoured other believers in a special way. Seeing the faith of the centurion Jesus said: "Truly I tell you, in no one among Israel have I found such faith. I tell you, many will come from East and West and will eat with Abraham and Isaac Jacob in the kingdom of heaven." (Mt 8:10-11) Jesus praised the Canaanite woman's faith "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done to you as you wish". (Mt 15: 28). He proposed a Samaritan as a model of love for one's neighbour (Lk 10: 25-37). He did not hesitate to ask water from a Samaritan woman, which was forbidden at that time.(Jn 4: 7)

7. Religions demand the practice of love and compassion

Religion is not only the way to God, but also the way to the human. It is not mere contemplation, the fight of the alone to the alone, as Plotinus said. It is also a way of active service. All religions demand the practice of love and compassion.

The Atharvaveda says: "Like-heartedness, like-mindedness, non-hostility do I create for you; do you show affection, one towards the other, as does the cow toward newborn".

Lao Tse says, 'we must reply to our adversary with mercy and goodness'. The Mahabharata says: Even an enemy must be afforded appropriate hospitality when he enters the house: a tree does not withhold its shade even from those who come to cut it down.

In Rock Edict XII Asoka proclaims that the faiths of others all deserve to be honoured. By honouring them one exalts one's own faith and at the same time performs a service to the faith of others. By acting otherwise, one injures one's own faith and also does disservice to that of others.

Hillel remarks: "What is hateful unto thee, do not do unto thy fellow". Isiah (2, 10) made Yahweh the one God of all mankind. Amos declared that Yahweh cared nothing for ceremonial worship but for justice and righteousness. Prophet Malachi says: "Have we not all one Father? Hath not one God created us? Why then are we faithless to one another?"

Justin Martyr said: "All those who have lived with the Logos i.e. with the eternal divine world-reason are Christians, even if they have been taken as atheists, as Socrates and Heraclitus". In Tertullian's phrase, the pagan soul is naturally Christian. Nicholas of Cusa regarded all religions as different expressions of the Word of God: 'It is you, O God, who is being sought in the various religions, in various ways and named with various names, for You remain as You are, to all incomprehensible and inexpressible.'

The Sufis advocate the following view

A Church or a Temple or a Kaaba stone,
Koran or Bible or Martyr's Soul,
All these and more my heart can tolerate,
Since my religion now is love alone.

A scientific study of religions and their interrelations in the past show that there is a common substratum of all religions: the unredeemed situation of the human, the longing for liberation, the recognition of the Divine Reality and many ways to reach the Real are found in all religions. The concepts of Virgin birth, the death and resurrection of the redeemer God, the inspiration of the sacred scriptures, the efficacy of grace, the use of the rosary, the conception of Trinity, the kingdom of God, priesthood, monasticism, etc. are found in every religion. Religions have influenced each other, helped each other and enriched the world. For example, Christianity received from Babylonia the idea of God as the maker of heaven and earth, from Persia the dualism of Satan and God, from Egypt last judgment, from Phrygia the worship of the Great Mother, from Greece and Rome the idea of universal law. (S. Radhakrishnan, pp. 51-58)

The above study shows that it would be erroneous to assume that the mind-set, which is labelled by the word fundamentalism, is invariably connected with the essence of religion. What happens really is that at a time when everything is in a flux and nothing seems to be stable and permanent, people feel a nostalgia for the customary and routine-bound

past. They make a resolute and stubborn return to a way of life in the past based on religion though for our time it may be outworn and irrelevant. The political and religious leaders having vested interests manipulate the religious minded people and transform them as inimical to other religious groups. The illiterate hope that the irrational attachment to the fundamentalist interpretation of sacred texts and exclusion of the 'other' will resolve their contemporary problems.

Conclusion

Humankind is today in the midst of one of the greatest cries in history. In spite of the fact that the great scientific inventions have liberated us from servitude to nature, we seem to suffer from a type of religious neurosis. We need a moral and spiritual therapy, which would heal the human mind. The best medicine to be applied may be the spirituality of a universal religion, a religion of awareness and love, of wisdom and compassion, of truth and love. Religions are to be cured of their provincialism and they must rediscover their resources of pluralism, universality, compassion and love. We are born and trained in certain traditions of religion. But we are not supposed to transfer the absoluteness, which belongs to the Divine Reality, to its historical formulations. We must be able to hold our particular formulation as valid without denying the other forms. This is the one attitude consistent with faith in a Universal God. (S. Radhakrishnan, *The Present Crisis of Faith*, Hind Pocket Books, Delhi, pp. 24-26)

The religious and social leaders must turn their efforts to fashioning new ways of understanding their own religions so that they can play a role in promoting peace, dialogue and social justice. There should be inter-religious forums in every village to isolate those who mix religion with political and economic interests. Dialogue sessions, common defense of human rights, joint endeavours to development, sharing of spiritual exercises, etc., will increase mutual confidence and cooperation among the followers of various religions. If we don't take up this challenge to bridge the widened gap that exists between the temple, the mosque and the church, our world would become an uninhabitable planet. We have to live together and/or die together. There is no other alternative.

Religious Experience of the People Today

Augustine Perumalil

Today Religion is returning to the secular city owing to a realization of the precariousness of our existence and absence of security in the materialistic competitive outlook and the lack of anything one can believe whole-heartedly in. The feminist experience has brought to centre-stage the place and role of the family. This brings forward new forms of religious experience combined with aspirations to return to less alienated forms of living. Dr. Augustine Perumalil, S.J., who presented the paper, is teaching Philosophy in Satya Nilayam, Chennai.

I. The Religious Situation in the Twentieth Century

a. The Arrival of Modernity and the Loss of Faith

Zygmunt Bauman in an article titled "Societies of Instant Gratification in Different Cultures - Europe and North America", published in *Concilium* (No. 4. 1999) characterizes contemporary life all over the highly developed, modernized and well-off part of the globe as marked by a widespread and most painfully felt experience of precariousness, instability and vulnerability (Bauman 1999: 3-4). As Bauman sees it, in a world where there is no more any such thing as secure jobs in secure companies, where no one is insured against the next round of downsizing or "rationalizing", against the erratic shifts of the market, insecurity is unavoidable.

Bauman rightly points out that an uncertain situation stamped by transience and vulnerability, is unsuited for long-haul purposes and efforts. Where precariousness is not a matter of choice but of fate, instant gratification looks an enticingly reasonable strategy. In this situation men and women are taught to perceive the world as a container full of disposable objects and to refrain from developing attachments or entering

into lasting commitments. Whatever life may offer, has to be taken right away for who knows what tomorrow may bring. In the context of an uncertain future, delay of satisfaction for a greater satisfaction in the future loses its allure.

Bauman notes that the 'precarization' of future results in the falling apart and decomposing of human bonds, communities and partnerships. Commitments become contracts amenable to being broken unilaterally whenever one of the partners sniffs better value in opting out rather than continuing the relationship. People are not different from other objects of consumption. Therefore, there is no point in suffering discomfort and unease, in order to save a tottering relationship. If the pleasure derived is not up to the standard promised and expected, or if the novelty wears off together, there is no reason to stick to the inferior product. In such situations wiser people must seek "new and improved products", dedication to lasting values is a folly, suited, maybe, for the romantically oriented.

According to Bauman, the materialistic outlook, competitiveness and the absence of long-term security and commitments of modern industrialized society have resulted in the loss of faith in everything - things of both the sacred and the secular realms. To have faith means "to have trust in the meaning of life and to expect long-lasting importance of what one does or desists from doing" (Bauman 4). Faith comes easy when the world is relatively stable, when things and acts retain their value over a long period of time. In a logical and consistent world human life also acquires logic and consistency, and faith becomes robust; in an unstable world faith becomes uncertain. And with the weakening of faith, life itself loses its lasting significance. The situation Bauman describes is well summarized by Paul H. Santmire:

He [modern human] finds himself alone in the darkness in a stalled automobile. Nothing seems subject to control any more; surrounded by exquisite technological grandeur, the individual finds himself powerless. Even the intimate personal relationships somehow seem increasingly difficult to cultivate. In a world of isolated selves, where is the "Thou" in whose presence loneliness can be transcended? So the citizen of the post-modern era is frequently and profoundly alone with "nothing, nothing, nothing at all". His world has been shredded into thousand randomly scattered pieces. His own identity is under constant attack, for there are fewer and fewer fixed interpersonal as

well as social and religious points in relation to which he may find some confirmation of his identity. (cited in Johnson 447)

The experience of the psychologist Rollo May further confirms the observation of Bauman and Santmire. About the patients who approached him for help, he observed that they seemed to have nothing "they can believe wholeheartedly enough to make commitment of themselves possible" (cited in Johnson 447). To him his patients seemed to be reflecting the general disintegration of cultural and religious values, a disintegration that percolates down more and more broadly into the members of society. Thus in the twentieth century, the great 'sea of faith' which Mathew Arnold had watched receding with a roar at Dover Beach seemed to have reached such a low ebb that it would never return again. Observing what is taking place in the religious realm, the distinguished Italian sociologist Sabino Acquaviva wrote in his book *The Decline of the Sacred in Industrial Society*, "From the religious point of view, humanity has entered a long night that will become darker and darker with the passing of the generations, and of which no end can yet be seen" (Acquiviva 1979: 201).

Arnold, Aquiviva and friends did not mean that religion would totally wither away from industrialized societies. What they meant is that whatever religion remained would have little connection with the public square. It would completely be restricted to the sphere of personal and family values. As the American sociologist Richard Fenn in a widely read article published in 1972 noted, in modern industrial societies, the level of interdependence between social factors and religious change had been reduced to near zero. This was the conclusion of much of the literature on the state of religion till the early 1970s: the last nail on the coffin of God is driven and humanity is left to fend for itself. The general consensus among the academics seemed to be that religion is on the retreat and has to make way for the new dominance of the scientific and the secular. Therefore, it is true to say that in the early 1970s Nietzsche's phrase "death of God", with all its implications seemed to describe the 'religious' experience of the people of modern, industrialized, secular society. The word "secularization" seemed to be the key-word for the description of the religious situation of the times. It was assumed that the spheres of life which had formerly been shaped by a religious framework would be freed from the tutelage of the irreligious interpretation. This process was understood by most as a unified, irreversible and global transition from religion to secularity,

encompassing all dimensions of culture. To many advocates of secularism, this movement appeared like the fruition of the dynamics of autonomy that had begun in the Enlightenment.

b. The Revival of Religion in the 1970s

In the early 1970s the analysis of Santmire, Rollo May, Arnold, Acquivava and Fenn seemed to be correct. In most of the industrialized modern societies, religion seemed to have been eliminated from public life and assigned a place in the private lives of individuals. However, from the late 1970s the ebb tide appeared to be turning. Religion seemed to be staging a come back to the industrialized secular societies.

Two incidents are cited as indicators of the turning point. In January 1979, Ayatolla Khomeini had displaced an allegedly secular government of Mohammad Shah in Iran. The religious revolution in Iran demonstrated that secularization is by no means an irreversible process. Rather, it can be the breeding-ground of a new kind of religious radicalism that brings everything under religious rule. The second incident that may serve as an indicator of the turning point is the landing of Pope John Paul II in Mexico city, considered one of the most secular cities of the world, to be warmly welcomed by the people. This happened on 26 January 1979, ten days after the forced departure of Shah from Iran. As the Pope landed in Mexico city, millions of people lined to cheer and wave. With blithe disregard for the anticlerical laws and restrictions against the wearing of clerical dress and conducting public religious ceremonies, John Paul II appeared everywhere in his papal garb and celebrated mass in public. And as the departing Pope's plane circled the city on its way back to Rome, thousands of Mexicans flashed good bye with their tiny hand mirrors.

What happened in Iran and Mexico were not isolated events, but proved to be the beginning of a global phenomenon - a return of religion to the secular city. In many cultures the revival of religious orientations has exerted profound influence on all social and political questions. Theologian Harvey Cox in the Introduction to his influential book *Religion in the Secular City* (1984) details myriad signs of the return of religion to public square in the latter part of the twentieth century. To cite a few examples: In December 1980 four women missionaries were shot dead in El Salvador, because they were allegedly siding with the left-wing resistance movement. Catholic bishops in Brazil became the main opposition to the military regime there. Just across the boarder in

Central America, nuns and priests were cooperating with insurgent movements. The Bishops of Canada issued a sharp criticism of their government's economic policies, accusing discrimination against the poor. The church of South Korea publicly opposed the regime there. The Catholic bishop of Manila called on the businessmen of his nation to join him in opposing the Marcos government.

Even in the Communist countries religion appeared to be assuming a prominent public role. In Poland members of the Solidarity, a banned trade union movement, carried pictures of the Blessed Virgin Mary and sang hymns at their rallies. Even Russia witnessed a renewed interest among young people in traditional Russian Orthodoxy. And in February 1982 nearly four thousand youthful East Germans gathered in a Protestant church in Dresden to listen to talks by two Lutheran pastors in support of European nuclear disarmament.

In Western Europe also, once regarded as the epicenter of secularism, churches reappeared in the public realm. More recently the reign of Afghanistan was taken over by fundamentalist, fanatic Taliban, displacing the Soviet backed secular government. Though the Taliban was eventually decimated by relentless American bombing, they are sheltered in Pakistan and the fear of their regrouping is well founded. In the 2002 - general elections in Pakistan, the pro-Taliban, anti-American parties made considerable headway. The fear of the reign of Pakistan falling into the hands of religious hardliners is concrete and haunts both India and the West. In India the BJP improved its share of votes, and captured power in many states and even in the Central government by drumming up religious passions. A recent survey conducted in the Muslim world shows a pronounced hostility towards America, not only because of America's Israel policy, but also because it is seen as the epicenter of secular liberal values. Clearly, religion is back in a big way, confronting and overhauling institutions of public life¹. To quote Harvey Cox:

The city today does not prevent people from being religious. From the shipyard masses of Gdansk to the burgeoning Baptist churches of Houston to the sects in the slums, or *favelas*, of Sao Paulo and the cremation *ghats* of Benaras, religion appears to thrive, not expire... Some critics may not like the God they find. But to claim that none of this is religion is to claim something insupportable. (Cox 1984: 80-81).

1. For more details of the signs of the resurgence of religion see Harvey Cox. *Religion in the Secular City*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984) 12-19

These examples indicate that religion, diagnosed by many as moribund in the first half of the twentieth century, is making a lively return at the end of the century. In the words of Bingemer, we are witnessing "a resacralization of the very world whose profanity modern reasoning was quick to proclaim" (Bingemer 17). Hence, contrary to the predictions of popular secularization theories, the twenty-first century appears at its beginning not as a century which might bring the end of religion, but as a century characterized by a powerful renaissance of religious interest.

II. The Revival of Religion and New Faith Experiences

The signs of religious revival in a world that was considered secular are undeniable. The revival of religious interest in industrialized countries brings in its wake new forms of religious experience, often combined with aspirations to return to less alienated forms of living. These experiences bear the mark of postmodernist concerns, especially postmodernism's concern for the margins and the marginalized. Together with the experiences of those at the center, the experiences of those at the periphery are also brought to the center stage and given better articulation. The rest of this paper is about the religious experience of the people in the changed context as religion returned as a potent force in a world many thought was leaving it behind.

a. Conservatism and Fundamentalism

In the return of the religious sentiment the world is witnessing a rise in conservatism and fundamentalism. This rise is interpreted by many as a sign of the disaffection of considerable section of society with modernity and all that it stood for. For the conservatives modern theology is "a wasteland, lifeless and desolate..., contrived, unnatural, excessively technological, rootless and artificial" (Cox 1984: 38). The conservatives feel sad about the religious situation ushered in by modernity. They feel that something has been lost, and what is lost seems to be the beneficial aspects religion - the sacred, the element of mystery in life, the spiritual dimension, a morality firmly grounded in revealed truth.

The conservatives hold science and urbanization responsible for the sorry state of affairs. This does not mean that they are enemies of science. They believe that science, rightly used, can help rather than hinder faith. Still there is a deeply felt suspicion that the impact of certain kind of science has eroded the beneficial influence of traditional religion. Science-based technology with its dazzling display of results lures people

into thinking that it can now solve all the problems for which people once turned to God. The advancement of science has banished the sense of mystery, the feeling of awe before the numinous that scholars since Rudolf Otto have identified as the principal source of religion. The conservatives are quick to point out that for all its achievements, the predominance of science in the modern world weakens religion, and that this in turn makes life less livable.

There is among the conservatives a suspicion of urbanization. They believe that the city is the most concentrated location of the modern malady. Cities, they claim, are and always have been spiritual disaster areas. Many conservatives are convinced that spirituality and city life do not mix together. Urbanization brings in its wake fast-paced life style in place of the continuity of smaller-sized habitations. So cities will inevitably be evil.

The conservatives complain that secularity, fed by mindless gadgetry, has made our lives trivial and vacuous and our world a wilderness of hollow people, lacking in depth or transcendence. Despite the minor differences among the conservatives, they all agree on one thing: Just as God expelled Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden, today's men and women are trying to drive God out of their cities in order to create an earthly paradise. And the shame of modern theology, in the view of the conservatives, is that it has been unable or unwilling to prevent this disaster from taking place (see Cox 1984: 38-42).

To remedy the situation, the conservatives want to bring to an end the cohabitation of theology with the modern world. They want theology to go back to attending to the more enduring ideals it once cultivated, such as transcendence, mystery and the sacred. Their hope is that people will once again recognize the need for prayer and the forgotten art of prayer will once again come back to animate people's lives.

Another form that the renaissance of religion has taken is that of militant fundamentalism. We are living today in a world torn by the militancy of fundamentalists. In the words of Harvey Cox: "The sword of the Lord is unsheathed and fundamentalists are moving out of their self-imposed isolation into the mainstream" (Cox 1984: 48).

Fundamentalism emerged in the early twentieth century as a conscious counterattack on what its early leaders called "modernism". In modernism the fundamentalists see a subtle conspiracy. They impute the moral decay and ethical flabbiness of the modern world to the

conniving of secular humanists, who have taken control of all social institutions including the church. They are angry with the state of affairs and are ready to fight back to retrieve the cities from the infidels who control them today.

Fundamentalism has certain theological features that have led to an urgency of reaching out to lost souls. If Jesus is indeed coming soon, then every minute not devoted to reaching the lost souls will be a minute wasted. In the short period left before the second coming of Christ, there is no room for working for social progress or the attempt to build the Kingdom of God. For the Fundamentalists human beings do not build the Kingdom; building the Kingdom is God's task, and God will accomplish it when "Jesus will come again in glory".

The fundamentalists lament the runaway divorce rate, the proliferation of pornography, the banning of God from educational institutions and the rise in homosexuality. The more sophisticated among them decry the erosion of taste, the decline of language, the disappearance of civility. The fundamentalists of all hues agree that the underlying cause of all these symptoms is the disease of secularization or secular humanism; they all agree that there is a spiritual source to the moral, social and political decay.

Fundamentalists are not at home in the secular world. In the words of Willy Sunday, they want to puncture the devil in the nose. Fundamentalism thrives on the negative energy generated by its battle with "modernism". With the Sword of the Lord in hand, it wants to "rupture or to invade the citadels of sin". It attacks the modern age with every available weapon, including political ones, and when it is difficult to conquer the 'sinful, godless world' it turns its back on this fallen world, awaiting the coming judgment.

b. The Feminist Faith Experience

The feminist movement in the latter half of the twentieth century has contributed to the awakening of women about their dignity and rights and to the awareness that the naming of 'God' within the Christian tradition in male-only language and imagery has a destructive effect on women's spiritual life. As a result there is a widespread dissatisfaction among women with the traditional symbolism of God the Father, since it seemed to exclude women from positions of authority, and reduce her to an "other" to the male who is the subject. The symbolism of God the Father also seemed to leave her with no role models for the full becoming of a woman, calling into question the whole significance of the mystery

of incarnation for woman. Feminist theologians, therefore, feel the urgency to move beyond the patriarchal, distant controlling, white, male image of God and to create new images of God. Arising from their search, vibrant images of the divine are now appearing. Maternal images of 'God' - birthing, feeding, nurturing, compassionate, guiding, and fiercely protective - burst forth from the religious imagination while women try to articulate their God experience.

In seeking new images, feminists are not primarily concerned with novelty of conception, but with social change that would prepare the ground for women's empowerment and their full becoming of women. They are undertaking this daring new project to shape a new religious imagination that would enable them to address and to encounter 'God' in ways that are life-enriching for themselves and for their engagement in the gospel project of liberation, the enacting of the reign-of-God.

Ancient Goddess

One of the prominent images that emerges out of the feminist search is that of the ancient goddess. Goddess, represents the interconnectedness and interdependence of all things. Goddess teaches women to respect the seasons. Embracing goddess enables them to alter their views on death, life after death and tragedy.

The goddess experience is said to have many benefits. First, it is said to liberate women and heal their wounded bodies. Mary Gray describes how in the goddess experience, "women who have suffered oppression under patriarchy are brought into a completely new space where the female body and sexuality are valued" (Gray 2001: 20). Secondly, from the care and attention given in goddess experience to all aspects of nature, there arises an ethic of responsibility for creation, manifested in, for example, the care of animals and trees. Thirdly, the centrality goddess is said to compensate for the lack of female sacred images of the divine within Christianity. Lastly, Gray finds that the image of goddess helps us make connections with earth-based spiritualities of indigenous peoples and with the material base of all living and loving.

Fullness of Life

According to the feminist theologian Anna Maria Tepedino, women experience God "in their own manner. Since women carry children in their wombs, they experience God differently, as the fullness of life. This is particularly evident in the lives of the Latin American women and of the Hispanic women in the US and elsewhere. Tepedino believes

that the experience of motherhood also makes them experience God in a relational manner, that "goes beyond conceptual coldness". Her experience embraces "strength and tenderness, happiness and tears, intuition and reason" (Tepedino and Prado 1996: 63-64).

For the Latin American women experiencing God as "fullness of life" implies "bringing increased hope in community, hope for a healed relationship of women and men, and a future for their children" (Gray 2001: 21). Thus, in the image of God as fullness of life, the divine is experienced as the One who really protects and as the defender of those who have less life. So the God of fullness of life becomes the God of the transformation of society.

God Who is Passion for Relatedness and Justice

Another image gaining currency among women is the image of God as passion for relatedness. It is created to nature among women a life-enhancing relationship with their own selves, with others in the human and earth communities and with the 'God' whom they have encountered as mystery. According to the American theologian, Carter Heyward, God created the world out of a yearning for relation and mutuality. God is not a power that seeks to control, but the power of sensitivity, of compassion, of empathy, of affiliation and bonding. God's power is not autocratic, but relational.

This imaging of God as relational and life-affirming is expressed powerfully by Elsa Tamez. According to her, the God of the Bible is the God of the oppressed, and specifically, women, who are both poor and oppressed. Tamez's understanding of oppression goes deeper than social and political oppression and covers all forms of dehumanization, including the damage to self-esteem, to the inmost dignity of being a person. Thus God who is relational is also the God of justice. The God of justice is not external to us, but working in and through people of faith. God acts through our passion for just relation, and our commitment to justice. In the praxis of justice undertaken by the faith community Tamez discovers God's active presence in society.

For Tamez, the God of justice is a silent God. God maintains silence, since God has decided to act through the faith community:

Without the silence of God we cannot become men and women... God remains silent so that men and women may speak, protest and struggle... When God is silent and men and women cry, God cries in solidarity with them, but God does not intervene, God waits for the shouts of protest (Tamez 1985: 175 cited in Gray 22).

The Compassionate and Suffering God

That God weeps with our pain is another vital part of feminist re-imaging of God. The perception of God as one who suffers with us emerges from the experience of affliction and the presence of God within this affliction. Women give expression to their pain by referring to God as mother and midwife. In the fact that Jesus, about to suffer, compared the pain and the subsequent joy he would undergo to the travail of women in childbirth (John 14), women see the empathy of Jesus, and feel consoled that their suffering can be creative in the birthing of the "kin-dom", where we will all be brothers and sisters (Gray 23).

Contemporary feminist images arising from their experience depict Christ in the form of a woman, in the anguish of giving birth to the new creation. The passionate love of God for the most marginalized means that God identifies with our pain. For God sharing our pain is not a matter of shame, but an act of love, of compassion. Suffering women experience strength in the compassion of God poured out ceaselessly on humanity.

God as Wisdom

To articulate women's faith experience, feminist theologians have increasingly relied on the image of Sophia in the Bible. Spirit-Sophia is also associated to the idea of 'connected living' - non dualist, ecological, justice-centered and relational (Gray 24). This opposes the logos myth - competitive, materialistic, success-oriented and individualistic. In the words of Gray, "In Spirit-Sophia feminists see the woman, hidden in the shadows of patriarchy for many centuries, but now awakened, summoning us to deeper epiphanies of the Divine" (Gray 2001:24).

The reclamation of the image of God as Sophia has profoundly enriched women's spiritual life. The language and imagery of Sophia functions as an empowering figure in women's spiritual journey as it has enabled women to experience God "in a way that has enlivened their spirit, sharpened their 'vision' and given a new voice to their 'ecstasy' (Wainwright 2001: 96). It has not only inspired many feminist liturgies but also offered another face of God, a face that manifests God's vulnerability in the world, a face that shows how "tragedy is caught up into God" (Gray 2001: 24).

New Rituals

Though women have sought new images of God for their emancipation and spiritual renewal, they are painfully aware that it would

take a long time before those images gain currency in Christian religious discourse. Since most women know that the project of addressing 'God' in new idioms will be both long and difficult, they have developed rituals to celebrate their religious lives, nurture their religious imaginations, and sustain their spiritual journeys. They have begun to name 'God' in the images, language and symbols of their life experiences; and to tell the stories of their foremothers and their knowing of 'God'. Indigenous women from different cultures have begun to dance, sing and address their 'God' in ways that spring forth from the depths of their being and their ancient cultures (Wainwright 99-100).

c. God Experience of the Radically Marginalized

Liberation theology encounters God "at the margins". It is a reaction against the centrally located God who avoided the issue of the presence of God in the midst of people's deprivation and sufferings and against the marginalization of God from political and theological discourses. The image of "God at the margins" emerges from the struggles of the communities at the margins - poor communities, whose cultural and economic life has been put under siege; communities marginalized on economic and/or gender grounds. It is the means by which Christians try to find the face of God amongst the marginalized. This image of God, as Marcella Althaus-Reid points out, is the God who left God's centered location to go to the margins (Althaus-Reid 2001: 28). As people needed to make sense of the unfair economic structures from the Christian perspective, God at the margins proved to be full of rich suggestions.

God at the margins is the product of a desire to overcome injustices, to see the presence of God in the world history of oppression. According to Althaus-Reid, it arises from the life experience of people who are surrounded by poverty and social exclusion. In this circumstance of extreme marginalization, including the marginalization of the God of liberation from political and theological discourses, Christians have found a new space for God - at the margins, wherefrom God can begin God's subversive activity. Finding God as a co-suffering friend, as Althaus-Reid notes, is more subversive than it looks (Althaus-Reid 2001:29).

The God at the margins is the God who is present to the people who are suffering. This was a God "out there", a God at the garbage dumps of Asia and South America and the God who accompanies people during the droughts in Africa. Here God had made an exodus of God from the center to the margins; but did not identify Himself with the suffering

humanity. In other words, this is a God who accompanies the people suffering from hunger and thirst, but not a thirsty God, the God who pities the children of the streets, but not the God of the streets, a God at the margins, but not a marginal God. To address the pains of the people at the margins - the rag-pickers, the coal miners, the tribals, the harijan women - there was the need, not of a God who sympathizes with those at the margins, but who belongs to them.

To respond to this need, liberation theology produced a more radical image of God - that of the "marginal God". The marginal God is a God-rediscovered as people began to pay attention to the life situation of those at the margins. This God has little common ground with the vicarious "God of the poor who, although visiting the margins, still lives far away.

What we are noticing here is a theological exodus in three stages: from a God at the center, who was a good excuse for and justification of economic and cultural systems of exploitation, to a God at the margins who sympathized with those at the margin without identifying with them, and from the God at the margins to a God who assumes the margins and is comfortable there.

The experience of the marginal God leads away from the developmental modes of praxis. The marginal God is not powerful either to bring about development or to effect social change. Marginal God rules out ideas of dependence on a God-King and promotes mutual dependency. Marcella Althaus-Reid describes the praxis emerging from the experience of the marginal God:

In the experience of community work, hierachial concepts are replaced by solidarity among equals. Speeches and sermons are replaced by dialogue among marginalized people. No one has a last word, not even God. God in Jesus is a God who is in a constant conversation with people, asking their opinion and experiences and working from there... The marginal God is one who encourages disloyalty to the ideals of 'uniqueness' in favor of plurality, since uniqueness is perceived as the virtue of totalitarianism (Althaus-Reid 2001:31).

d. The Faith Experience of the Asian Christians

When we come to the Asian scene, we notice that because of a dichotomous approach to life, the Asian intellectuals, for the most part, are able to continue to live in the two worlds - the secular and the religious

- without one radically affecting the other. This places the vast areas of the underdeveloped part of Asia in the strange position of being in contact with the products of modernity, without being affected by its accompanying world views, especially secularism and scientism. Because of this dichotomous approach to life, Asians though in touch with the perceptibly altered intellectual climate which is a direct result of modern science and technology, are still unconsciously conditioned to perceive the world as defined by their aesthetic, cultural and religious traditions. Therefore, the temporary recession of religion from public life and its eventual reappearance that we had witnessed in the industrialized countries had not been part of the faith experience of the underdeveloped Asian countries.

In the Asian region the social realities that affect the faith life of the people are recurrent civil and religious conflicts, corrupt governments and human right violations, in addition, to rapid population growth, urban migration and deepening economic crisis due to the globalization of economy. On the religious front, Asia is a home of many religions, where the presence and influence of Christianity are negligible. Christianity in Asia is trying to make itself relevant to this Asian reality. In this context, the questions confronting Asian Christians are: 1) What experience of fulfillment can the Christian religion offer in the midst of a consumer society that tends to exclude the needy. 2) In the context of religious pluralism, how to understand the revelation of Yahweh in Jesus Christ, and how to explain the Bible and its good news to those children of Yahweh who have not accepted Christ as the Savior? To respond to these questions and to make herself relevant to the socio-cultural environment, the Asian church is trying to integrate traditional contemplative approach with an apostolic dynamism characteristic of modern Asia (cf. Puthenkalam 1999: 11).

In the context of a corrupt consumer society that tends to exclude the needy, the church has been journeying with the poor and sharing in their day-to-day joys and sorrows. Church institutions are, by and large, at the service of the local and national needs. Christian educational institutions, hospitals, healthcare network, and pastoral and socio-cultural centers deepen their commitment to work for the promotion of faith and justice.

Yet Asian Christians are deeply aware of their inadequacies to respond to the socio-political and economic challenges facing them. Except in Philippines, the church is only minimally present and its representation

in any of the areas of policy making, too, is nominal. The Asian church's economic influence, too, is minimal. But even in the situation of such powerlessness and minimal presence, the Asian church is trying to be aware of the negative and positive effects of the major developments and megatrends in Asia so that it can be an effective instrument of transition to a better world. In a globalized economy that promotes unbridled competition, people tend to ignore the weak and neglect the needy. The Asian church is trying to make itself relevant and prophetic in the region by developing a praxis-oriented analysis of the realities of Asia and design a new vision-mission strategy out of the Asian reality. The Asian church is thus trying to witness to Jesus Christ and his gospel by including the excluded and by embracing the marginalized.

Faced with the diversity of religious traditions and their vibrant faith, Asian Christians are trying to find a renewed understanding of the revelation of Yahweh in Jesus Christ and new ways of explaining the Bible and its good news to their contemporaries. In the past decade religious pluralism has emerged as the most debated question of all. Neither fundamentalism nor liberation theology seems particularly well suited to deal with religious pluralism. Inspired by a theology that upheld Christian superiority, and supported by the colonial powers, the church in the past had tried a praxis consisting of condemnation, confrontation and assimilation, eliciting the hostility of those religions that were adversely affected by this. But in the changed theological and political climate, dialogue rather than condemnation or confrontation is seen to be the most appropriate response to religious pluralism. As the Asian Christians move towards dialogue with other religions, they find themselves entangled in a dilemma: should they emphasize similarities or differences? If the similarities are emphasized, it would promote mutual respect and dialogue. On the other hand, if differences are highlighted there is a high probability that it would lead to religious fundamentalism and religious conflicts.

In the context of religious pluralism, Asian Christians are becoming increasingly restless with the traditional understanding of other faiths as nothing but follies, or at best, "rays of hope" containing "grains of truth". On the one hand, Christians in Asia believe that the fearless profession of faith in Jesus Christ through a life of witness is the core and essence of Christianity and the *raison d'être* for the apostolic works of the church. They, therefore, want to fearlessly confess Jesus as the Christ, the Son of the Living God, with all its implications. On the other

hand, they do not want to deny that other religions, too, are capable of mediating salvation to their genuine followers. The Asian Christians are, therefore, struggling to find ways of proclaiming the gospel of Jesus without offence to other religious faiths and without minimizing the importance of their traditions and teachings in God's plan of salvation. They are aspiring to find their identity as the people of God, without excluding the non-Christian majority from the community of God's people.

With the acknowledgement that other traditions, too, are part of God's plan of salvation, Christians are realizing the need for a dialogue with those traditions and many dialogue centers are established to meet this need. In these dialogue centers Christians are trying to meet their fellow travelers of other great religious traditions not in an aggressive way, with an air of superiority, but with a sense of openness and a willingness to listen to what the other ancient religions say.

The awareness that other traditions too are there by the will of God has a number of consequences for Christian self-understanding. As Schwobel Christoph points out, Christians no more experience that they have the total vision of God, but see fragmentary experiences of God in all religions, which add up to a holistic vision of God, a global concept of God that needs to be pieced together by skillful theologians until the pattern of the true character of God begins to appear from the puzzle (Christoph 2001:110). Again, in the context of dialogue Christians have come to understand anew Jesus's injunction to preach the gospel and to baptize, as an invitation to share the life in the spirit with widows and orphans, with those suffering injustice and violence, because it is in the injustice of a violent death that God chose to disclose his love.

Christians are becoming more and more aware of the implication of the realization that it is the same God who is worshipped by other peoples, especially the Jews and the Muslims. They realize that any exclusivism would run the risk of reducing God to a Christian tribal god, whereas a relativistic pluralism that regards revelation in Jesus Christ as one among many 'revelations' of God would be a criminal negligence of the specific and concrete character of that revelation in favor of an unfounded universalism. Faced with religious pluralism, Christians are trying to critically reexamine Christian faith and thought in order to understand the unique characteristics of Christian identity in the context of the diversity of religious manifestations.

Concluding Remarks

Modernity had sought to banish religion from the public square and relegate it to the realm of private piety. But in the cultural situation of the late twentieth century, the principles of modernity are no longer taken for granted. Postmodernists have pointed out how modernity has failed in delivering the eschaton - emancipation of humanity from hunger, thirst, disease, hopelessness and meaninglessness - it had promised through its optimisms such as science and Marxism. They have also drawn our attention to the inequities of modernism such as silencing the small or local narratives in favor of the metanarratives, marginalizing differences in the name of universalizing goals, devaluing of the local value in favor of the universalizing value, and contributing to the maintenance of the unequal and oppressive systems through the glorification of the high culture and debasement of mass culture. Born of these realizations was the postmodern condition - a suspicion of metanarratives a new legitimacy for the mass culture and a reaffirmation of local values.

The plausibility crisis of modernism questions all standards based on it including the privatization of religion. The loss of the Enlightenment principles as the universal canon for regulating the common life of modern societies leads to the return of the canons of religious traditions. In the words of Schwobel Christoph, "The de-canonicalization of the principles of the Enlightenment leads to the re-canonicalization of religious traditions" (Christoph 2001: 109). The result was a renewed fascination for religion experienced in many societies. Religion diagnosed by many as moribund in the first half of the twentieth century, makes a lively return at the end of the century, riding the tide of postmodernism and often assuming assertive and even militant forms.

As Caputo noticed, religion has returned, not merely among poor illiterate people, but even among avant-grade intellectuals. They have given it a new legitimacy by affirming the legitimacy for the mass culture and a reaffirmation of local values. Under the guise of the small or local narrative, we may no longer be hearing simply about the demise of religion, most famously proclaimed by Nietzsche, but we keep hearing a great deal about what has been called its "return".

It is not surprising that the revived religion bears the marks of postmodernism, which had midwifed it. In the spirit of postmodernism, it affirms modernity's "marginalized others" - specifically women, the poor working class and the citizens of the underdeveloped countries -

and makes space for the small, local narratives of the marginalized and for local values. As a result, we find modernity's marginalized others moving to the central stage in the church, claiming their place therein and bringing with them a rich plethora of religious narratives and local values in place of the grand narratives and universalizing values of traditional Christianity. The benefits of this trend to the church cannot be underrated, as it helps the church to become what it truly is - the people of God and the church of the poor - and to evolve new spiritualities that would help various cultural groups to realize their full humanity and achieve extraordinary renewal of Christian life.

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Contemporary Vision of Religion

*Statement
by the Participants of the National Seminar
held at Jeevadhara, Kottayam
February 24-26, 2003*

Religious Pluralism is a Sign of the times and the different Religions are part of the Divine plan for the whole human kind. So the status quo that Religions are dividing humanity into warring factions using the deepest emotions of humans for political, cultural, and economic dominations over one another has to be changed.

We the participants in the Jeevadhara National Seminar on "Contemporary Vision of Religion", February 24-26, 2003, felt that people of faith cannot any longer remain in the traditional attitudes of 'exclusivism' or inclusivism or indifferent pluralism. One has to recognize that other religions are there by God's will and design for the salvation of all his children, part of the one history of the human race, and hence the common heritage of all.

Faith itself is God's free gift to all his children inviting them to the final goal of creation, namely, fellowship with God. Plurality arises out of the diversity of experiences, basic problems faced by different traditions, their different philosophical perspectives reflected in their divergent ways of proving the existence of God, and the very conception of human salvation. Hence plurality is an invitation to dialogue and interaction among the many religions to attain a shared vision and collaborate for the good of all. Religion is an experience before being a message, ritual or way of life. Even Scriptures, instead of being bearers of esoteric doctrine are first and foremost expressions of the deeply felt sense of transcendence. The many religions evolved in history, and each one made a unique contribution to face the actual challenges of the times.

The human quest for God-experience, belongs to the core of many religions. But the articulation of this essence and the life styles evolving

out of them do differ. Buddhism goes in the direction of *sunyata* and *nirvana*, to silence and meditation. Islam from the emphasis on the One, All powerful moves to bring all to obedient faith in Allah and his Law in the Qur'an. Hinduism moves to the ineffability and superiority of Brahman. Religion is not the ultimate but only the way to the Uncreated both within and without. Our natural tendency towards unity leads to union against all tendencies for division and disintegration. The Spirit unifies everything including the cosmos and spirituality brings all things to inspiration from the inner principle, while an over emphasized outward movement can lead to *ahamkara* and dissipation. Spirituality is our participation in the Spirit who is by nature consciousness. A spiritual person should participate in the characteristics of the Spirit, unborn, eternal, free and holding all things together. The one spirituality that goes beyond the multiplicity of religious configurations is the Spirit of the divine light working in human beings. This Spirit is operating in all human beings of good will and hence the fundamental dynamics of true spirituality can be operative in all religions. The Spirit produces love, joy, peace, patience and other virtues and has given us life and so must control also our lives.

But religious experience itself has a wider meaning, namely the understanding of what is ultimate in life, differently termed as salvation, happiness, faith experience and the like. With the advance of science, technology and human progress enshrined in Modernity, it was assumed that God was dead and that humans could solve all their problems and keep moving ahead on their own resources without the help of religion. But with the realization that science and technology did not deliver what they promised and that they contained something destructive along with the so called progress, religion itself has made a comeback. But the first attempts of this revival was to put the clock back through conservatism and fundamentalism.

Fundamentalism was a term used first in North America in the 1920's to designate the position of those who vehemently defended the traditional conservative teachings of Christianity against the modern interpretations of the Bible based on the new exegetical methods. The main feature of Christian fundamentalists was that they thought themselves to be the true Christians calling the liberals nominal Christians. In recent times the term is used to designate also the intolerant attitudes of the Talibans and Hindutva activists. In this recent intolerance communalism and political vested interests play a great role launching

for it pseudo-religious organizations. They try to reconstruct a golden past, and state that those who do not believe in their value system are evil and inspired by evil. Often they are unable to confront change and resent every rational interpretation of religion. Forgetting the people whom religion has to serve, fundamentalists claim for themselves the authority to impose their view on everyone else. In fact tolerance of pluralism and respect for the faith of others are more in the spirit of religion, than arbitrarily abrogate the authority of religion to dominate over others.

The new spirit of resurgent religion is apparent in several movements that show its creative and innovative dynamism. The feminist movement shows the faith experience of women awakening to the vibrant images of God as Mother and source of the fullness of life. Similarly the faith experience of the radically marginalized show God as present in the margins of society not as a marginalized God, but as one who assumes and transforms the margins. Today the human may be at the center, but the human stands for the ultimate of human life. What has actually happened is the awareness that God the center is everywhere and the periphery is nowhere. Here the traditional preachings and instructions directed to the people at the margins have become dialogues. The faith experience of Asian Christians is rather ambiguous. As a minority community they have not exercised the freedom that faith gives, and not fully faced the challenge of the triple dialogue with the massive poverty of the East, its different cultures and many religions. They have, however, moved away from the metanarratives of the past to find in their local experience the narrative hermeneutics for their universal faith.

The new religious movements in Hinduism present a potent challenge. First came the Ramakrishna Mission which evolved a new pattern of Indian monasticism borrowing heavily from the active religious orders of Christianity. Then in recent times have come the many cult religions like those of Satya Sai Baba, Amrtananda Mayi, and Chinmayananda. They religiously adhere to the spiritual ideals of Hinduism, but readily accept structural elements of community, fellowship and social service with a certain contempt for traditional ritual and temple worship, focusing the whole attention on the charismatic personality of the leader. They accept members from all over the world and have their mutts and samitis in every place. More young people than elders are attracted to these movements since they provide a powerful new sense of belonging and mission. Though they experience some resistance from the people outside

it only strengthens their resolve. Their publications narrate the life story of the Guru, his/her miracles, and personal experiences of their devotees. Liberty is realized in another realm, preferably disoriented from the milieu of social relations of any specific society, and thus transcend the caste restrictions. Rising above the nationalism of the colonial period and consciously relating themselves to the Ancient Indian culture, the new religious leaders are centers of motivation, authority and allegiance, determining in some degree how people should behave in situations of private and public choices. Differing sharply from the cult movements abroad Indian religious movements do not attack the existing system of beliefs and practices but co-exist with the mainstream. They have an underlying philosophical and religious system that acknowledges God-realization as the individual's ultimate goal. The internal dynamics of these new movements makes them viable social entities, though there is a certain contradiction between the concern for personal satisfaction and whole hearted dedication to the other, between the traditional preference for the high castes and the call of the low castes and the tension between ideology and practical concern of the most modern technology.

What is being questioned today is the relationships traditionally fostered by religions. First of all globalization has forced upon us a new relationship to which we have to respond creatively. The sovereignty of nations is being diluted and questioned. Every culture and society is being challenged to redefine itself. Even the most walled up ethnic group or tribe is forced to open windows to other groups. Civil society itself has become impatient with the tensions and brawls of religions among themselves. There is a high degree of loss of trust in most religions since they seem to have deviated from their goals. Hence religions are called upon today to vindicate their basic claim on a common platform. Religions have to create a suitable platform to assemble, share perceptions and plan concrete steps to regain their credibility. For this religions have to cultivate a positive disposition towards one another other. One has to establish a common *sadhana* where all interested seekers from different religions can assemble and share perceptions. There should also be a plan to reorient our institutions with a view to facilitating social relations. We have also to create interreligious bodies to publish the common insights and help our children to grow in a new culture of interrelatedness. Can we not also search out new symbols that embody and declare the community values of harmony and diversity in a multi-cultural and multi-religious situation!